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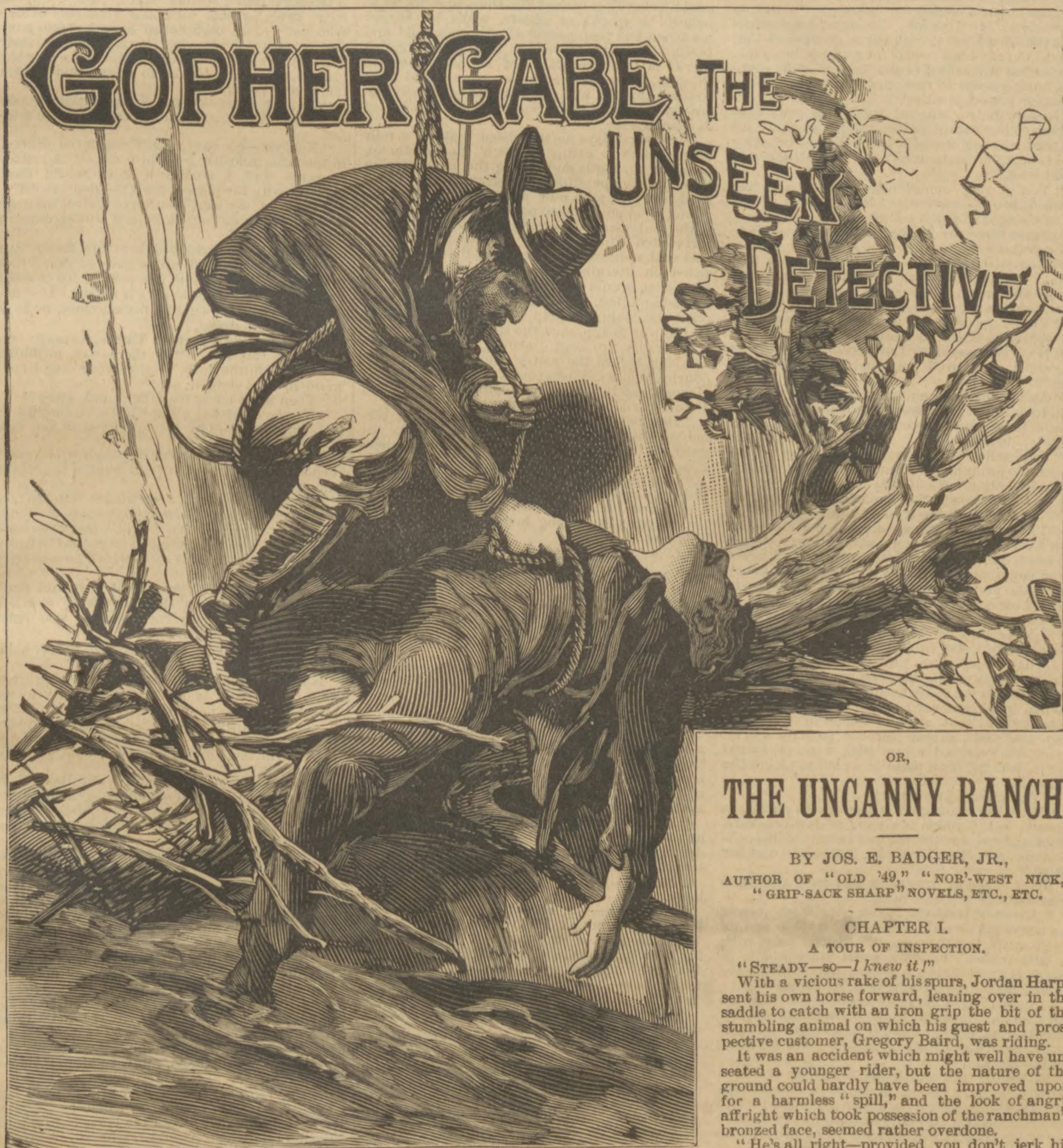
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OR,
THE UNCANNY RANCH.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49" "NOR'-WEST NICK,"
"GRIP-SACK SHARP" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TOUR OF INSPECTION.

"STEADY—so—I knew it!"

With a vicious rake of his spurs, Jordan Harpe sent his own horse forward, leaning over in the saddle to catch with an iron grip the bit of the stumbling animal on which his guest and prospective customer, Gregory Baird, was riding.

It was an accident which might well have unseated a younger rider, but the nature of the ground could hardly have been improved upon for a harmless "spill," and the look of angry affright which took possession of the ranchman's bronzed face, seemed rather overdone.

"He's all right—provided you don't jerk his head off."

"I thought you were down, and—"

THOMPSON HELPED TO EASE THE STRAIN ON THE NOW FEEBLY MOANING MAN, AS HE GAVE THE WORD TO HAUL AWAY.

"'Twould have been like tumbling into bed with a spring mattress," broke in Baird, his keen, gray eyes flashing over the luxuriant bunch-grass, here growing to perfection, as viewed by a stockman. "I'm almost sorry I didn't try a tumble, just to recall old times, and— Why, man, dear, you're pale as a ghost!"

Jordan Harpe passed a hand swiftly over his face, forcing a sickly smile.

"A broken neck is no joke, Mr. Baird."

"Particularly when that would entail a broken bargain, eh?" laughed the elder horseman, drawing rein and gazing toward a goodly-sized, weatherbeaten building which had, until then, been hidden from view by a slight elevation of ground. "Isn't that what they call the Haunted Ranch?"

Those keen eyes turned toward the ranchman just in time to note a frown and hot flush, the latter quickly fading away, to leave a sickly pallor behind it.

"Then you've heard— Who told you?"

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't have heard?"

"No. Only—well, of course I wouldn't exactly lie about it, but if I could keep the drawback covered over until you had made up your mind to take the place off my hands, why—see?"

"Then you admit this Uncanny Ranch is a drawback?"

"It might be, if you were inclined to be superstitious—yes."

"Which is not one of your failings, of course?"

"Leave the 'not' off, and you've got it straight as a string!" declared Harpe, a shiver visible as he gazed upon the gloomy building. "I am superstitious. If I wasn't, I'd never have made you the offer I have. Hardly a glimpse of that cursed old shell but brings me a sup of bad luck! And—that was why I broke loose at your stumble, back yonder: I reckoned it meant a broken neck for you—I just did!"

Gregory Baird laughed softly, his gray eyes taking in the details before them. Possibly his interest was heightened a bit by the odd behavior of his host, but naught akin to superstition was awakened.

"You're very considerate, Harpe," glancing toward his companion. "Most people would have charged so much additional for each ghost. Of course there are ghosts, and spooks, and hobgoblins galore?"

"There's something: I'll never tell you just what!" nodded the ranchman, touching up his horse and heading toward a not very distant patch of stunted trees and undergrowth.

"Your line does not include this spot, I believe?" asked Baird, keeping him company.

"No. We passed my line just before your nag stumbled. I showed you the limit, back yonder."

"And aroused my curiosity by the very means you took to put it to sleep," with a laugh. "You should have schooled your cowboys more thoroughly, dear fellow."

"I did tell them to—well, not to fetch up the ranch too prominently," laughed Harpe, seeming more like his usual self now that the lay of the ground concealed the building from sight.

"Which one took the trouble to post you?"

"I'm not sure I remember, and of course you don't want me to give a guess. Anyway, there's no harm done, so far as I'm concerned. I never lived neighbors to a family of spooks, but if they can make matters more interesting than I can, when I once get started, all right!"

"I don't fancy they'll trouble you, unless—"

"Unless they're something more substantial than ghosts. Are they?"

Jordan Harpe was just drawing rein near a spring, about which the grass grew more sparsely, thanks to the stony nature of the ground. He turned quickly toward his companion, startled, it seemed, by that abrupt change of tone. He met that keen, almost piercing gaze for a brief space, then turned away with a short, forced laugh, looking for a place in which to picket the animals.

"You mean—just what?"

"That I'm raising no objections to ghosts, as ghosts; but if there is a gang of law-breakers, stock-thieves, cut-throats and rascals of like caliber, masquerading as spooks, that's quite another thing!"

Black eyes met gray, and this time the smile was with the younger man.

"A sort of Robbers' Roost, eh? Wish it was no worse than that! I know how to round up such cattle, but these—ugh!" turning away with a little shiver, to shift lariat from saddle to head-stall. "Light, pardner, and we'll let the ponies nibble a bit while we're snacking."

Gregory Baird at once complied, moving with an ease and lightness which proved him already saddle-wise, though more than a round score of years had passed since he used to make his home in the pigskin.

Adjusting the trail-rope, he drove the iron picket-pin firmly home in a spot where his animal could find more than fair pickings, though the bunch-grass was by no means as plenty here as at the point from whence he had caught his first fair view of the Uncanny Ranch.

Jordan Harpe bustled about in a lively manner, partially emptying a haversack attached to his saddle, then gathering a quantity of dry

twigs and sticks with which to start a small fire near the spring which rendered this a model camping spot.

George Baird bided his time until the little two quart pot was supplied with water and snugly nestled among the crackling sticks; but if Jordan Harpe allowed himself to believe that disagreeable subject had been finally dropped, he was quickly undeceived.

"Suppose we get back to our mutton, while waiting for our coffee, Mr. Harpe? Where neighbors are so few and far apart, one naturally wishes to know something about those next door. Who owns that ranch?"

"No person that I know of. It stood just as you saw it when I set my stakes. No person lived there then; no person occupies it now. If its roof gives shelter to any thing, be sure it's not a gang of robbers such as you hinted at."

Gregory Baird frowned a bit. Though Jordan Harpe spoke glibly enough, his eyes seemed less willing to bear their share, and never once met that keen gaze squarely.

What was it he was trying to hide? Was there a double meaning in the guarded hints let drop by the confidential cowboy, from whose lips Gregory Baird had gathered not a little concerning the Haunted Ranch, as that gloomy, deserted building was dubbed? Was this reluctance to speak openly and frankly, anything more than the reluctance which a man, otherwise bold and strong, might naturally betray at exposing his one superstitious weakness?

For himself, he would have cared but little. He was absolutely devoid of superstition, and could feel only contempt for those so weak as to believe in spooks or ghosts, while his earlier manhood had been passed amid scenes wild and thrilling enough to render him proof against fear of lawless mortals. But he had others to think of, others near and dear who would have to share this life with him, should he finally decide to purchase the "Square Ring Ranch" of Jordan Harpe.

For several days he had been making a tour of inspection in company with the ranchman, counting the herds and noting the character of the soil, its capabilities for grazing, its water facilities, etc., and now all was done save deciding whether or no to pay the price set.

He had gleaned something regarding this "Haunted Ranch" from the cowboys, and it was with a desire to learn more that he had insisted on literally following the line which, as he knew, would bring them close to the ill-named building. All the more determined because he could not help seeing how reluctant Harpe was to approach the spot.

With the fire kept burning briskly, it was not long before the water came to a boil, and pouring a measure of ground coffee into the pot, Harpe quickly spread out a supply of cold food, almost gayly inviting his guest to "fall to!"

"Dry chewing, I'm afraid, but with hot coffee to wash it down, maybe you can make out until we hit the ranch again," he added, apologetically.

"Don't mention it, man! I've got the appetite of an ostrich! And if your spooks have as keen a nose for good coffee, we'll have the whole lot and parcel swooping down this way in another minute!"

"Ugh! don't, if you love me!" growled Harpe, giving his shoulders an uneasy shake as he glanced in the direction of the deserted ranch. "It may be fun to you, but to me— Have a cup, pardner!"

"Thanks! To listen to you, one would be tempted to think you really did believe in ghosts!"

"Seeing, and hearing, and feeling, all combined, ought to be proof sufficient for even a skeptic, don't you think, Mr. Baird?"

"And you mean to say?"

"That I've experienced precisely that!" with a dogged nod of his head and swift glance into that half-sneering face. "What I saw and heard and felt, I can take an oath was nothing mortal, like you or I. Then—what was it, if not haunts?"

"Be a little more explicit, and I'll try to give an answer. I'm no believer in spirits—of that description—but I'm open to conviction. What was it you saw, and heard, and felt?"

But Jordan Harpe shook his head, almost sullenly.

"Not now—not here. I don't mind your laughing, so much. I'll give you the story when we're safe back at the ranch, if you still insist, for what happened, did happen! Knowing that, I'm proof against your ridicule. But—I can't tell it now—with that cursed den so close at hand!"

"Since you detest it so much, why not burn or destroy the ranch?"

"I'll explain that, too, for it makes part of the same story. After all," with a long breath that savored of relief, "I really meant to lay the whole thing bare before closing the bargain; but I wanted to let you judge of your bargain without bringing up aught to excite your prejudice against the neighborhood."

"A colony of spooks won't frighten me off," laughed Baird, holding out his cup for a fresh supply of coffee. "If you can guarantee that your spirits are not altogether evil ones, why—"

His sentence was left incomplete, for just then one of the horses gave a sharp snort of anger or affright, rearing back to the end of its tether, which snapped with an audible sound.

CHAPTER II.

HIDDEN HANDS AT WORK.

IN order to give them better grazing, the two horses had been staked out at some little distance from the spring, and where they were but partly visible to their masters.

The spring issued from the base of a considerable mass of rock, and for a number of yards around the soil was too stony for a favorable growth of grass.

At the edge of this stony tract, bushes and a few stunted trees had sprung up, forming a cover quite high and thick enough to conceal the movements of an enemy, whether two or four-footed.

"Look to your guns, pardner!" cried Harpe, not so excited but that he took time to set his freshly-filled cup of coffee down without spilling it. "So-bo, boy!"

It was his own favorite saddle-horse, and under ordinary circumstances a whisper was good as law to the intelligent creature; but now, in place of halting as expected, the animal wheeled as its liberty was gained, and with a frightened snort, dashed away through the fringe of undergrowth at top speed.

Its mate also showed fright, backing away until brought to a halt by its trail-rope, its head erect, its ears pricking, its nostrils widely dilated.

Gregory Baird sprang erect, hand dropping to a revolver-butt with the readiness of one who had before been called upon to burn powder in self-defense; but keenly though their gaze penetrated the foliage, neither one nor the other could detect aught to cause that sudden fright and break-away.

"Man or beast—do you sight anything?" asked Baird, thumb on hammer and finger on trigger.

"Not yet—go easy, pard!" muttered Harpe, in the same guarded tone of voice. "A critter of some sort, I reckon; a man would have gone off with the horse. Steady—don't rush!"

"Look at my nag," muttered Baird, his gray eyes all aglow as he took note of one significant fact.

Though the animal still kept its lariat taut and its ears pricked up, it showed no further evidence of fear, nor did it appear to see or scent aught in the bushes to give it alarm. Instead, its eyes were following its fleeing mate, more in curiosity than dread.

"You're right!" nodded Harpe, instantly recognizing this fact. "If there was anything dangerous in the bush, be sure your nag would know it—and show it, too!"

"Then what made the other break away?"

"Maybe a rattler, maybe just a fool notion of its own, though—but I'll mighty soon find out. You stay here while—"

"Thanks. It's part of the day's work, and I reckon I'll try to hold my end level, if it's all the same to you."

Harpe shot a swift, keen glance into the face of the speaker, and saw enough there to choke back the objections he might otherwise have raised. He was beginning to learn that Gregory Baird had a will of his own, which he was fully capable of exercising.

"All right. Go 'round that way and don't spare powder if you sight anything worth a cartridge. Eyes open for snakes, if you enter the bush though!"

"Likewise spooks, eh?" chuckled Baird, a little maliciously.

Harpe only half smothered something close akin to an oath as he turned abruptly away, his oil in hand as he inspected the covert. There was a dark, uneasy scowl disfiguring his bronzed face, but that might easily have come from annoyance at the, as yet, unaccountable performance of his steed.

"Nothing here; how with you, Baird?" he called out, after a few moments spent in piercing the scanty undergrowth with his keen gaze.

"Not even the ghost of a spook my way!" was the prompt reply.

"Just a fool trick, then, I reckon!" cried the ranchman, breaking through the bushes and approaching the remaining animal, satisfied that nothing larger than a snake could have escaped their united search. "I'll borrow your nag for a bit, and fetch mine back."

"Want any help?"

"No; I'll pick the brute up easy enough. Even if I have to rope him, it's but one man's job. Finish your grub in comfort."

"If the spooks will permit, be sure I will," laughed Baird, going back to the little camp-fire.

"Lucky you if they don't take you at your word!" growled Harpe, more to himself than to the scoffer.

Those repeated flings seemed to anger him, judging from the manner in which he jerked up the picket-pin and forced the horse out from the bushes into which its first fright had driven it. The creature shied away from him, and the doubled rope whistled viciously through the air to raise twin welts on the glossy hide.

"Steady, you brute!" grated the stockman, displaying the marvelous strength of his arm by violently dragging the snorting animal closer. "Has the devil got into your hide, too?"

This hot rage delayed rather than expedited matters, as Harpe was experienced enough horseman to see; and with an uncomfortable sense of being laughed at by his guest, he managed to smother his hot rage long enough to gain the saddle by a dexterous leap.

"Is there a bridge handy to cross in case the 'haunts' give you chase?" laughingly cried Baird, as the ranchman dashed away from the spring.

Jordan Harpe showed his teeth, though his face was averted from the jocose speaker.

"Wait—let the papers be signed, then—may the spooks make your bed, old fool!" hissed between his teeth as he rode swiftly away on the track of his horse.

The animal was no longer in sight, having disappeared around the point of rocks near which the two men had obtained their first fair view of the Uncanny Ranch; but Harpe showed little uneasiness while covering that stretch, knowing as he did that escape was well nigh impracticable in that direction, unless the frightened creature should make an abrupt bend to the left, following the course they had come.

"He hasn't done that, or he'd be in sight by this," was his mental decision, sweeping the lower ground before him with a keen glance.

He paid no attention to the trail left by the horse, knowing that it would be sighted as soon as the point of rocks should be turned, and with his hot anger cooling now that he found himself in the saddle and in motion, he gave his attention to removing the picket-pin and converting the trail-ropes into a lasso, ready for use in case his own nag should be too frightened to permit an easier capture.

Turning the point, he looked in advance, almost immediately sighting the runaway, uneasily moving about over the bunch grass, something more than a mile distant.

His heavy brows gathered anew as he saw this. No doubt he was wondering what could have given the horse such an affright.

As though this thought recalled the mocking words sent after him by Gregory Baird, Jordan Harpe cast a glance over one shoulder; but already the point of rocks cut off his view of the spring where he had left his guest.

"Dollars to cents the old fellow'll have a heap sight better opinion of ghosts in a week from now!" he muttered, with a short, hard laugh.

Coiling the rope and making sure it was in working shape, Harpe trotted briskly toward his own saddle-nag, veering a little to the left in order to cut off further flight in the only direction in which escape was possible. The other line of flight was barred by the canyon through which flowed the little river, and by the point of rocks so often alluded to.

"Steady, boy!" cried Harpe, soothingly, as he drew nearer the runaway and noted the curious manner in which it flinched as from some object of pain or terror, every few moments. "What's the matter with you?"

With a low whimper, the intelligent creature came sidling toward its master, showing no desire to escape, but still giving that odd side-step, or flinching, once or twice throwing its head around to snap at that side, and as often jumping away as though being stung sharply.

Knowing that he would not need to rope the horse, Harpe alighted and drove the picket-pin deep into the ground with his heel, then slowly moved toward his horse with outstretched hand, speaking gently.

So far as he could see, there was nothing fastened to the horse or the saddle, to explain those odd actions; but knowing the animal so well, he knew that there must be something out of order.

"So-ho, laddy-buck!" he muttered, catching the bridle-reins and patting the arched neck. "If I didn't know that spooks can be both seen and felt, cursed if I wouldn't be tempted to think one was riding you this minute—with mighty keen spurs, too!"

Louder, sharper came the last words, for his roving gaze, failing to find other cause for that curious flinching, fixed on a little streak of damp hair, apparently starting from near the upper portion of the sweat-guard attached to the stirrup-leather on that side. And while he gazed, a little drop fell from the hair to the ground: a drop that showed far too dark to be either water or sweat.

"Blood, by glory!" he ejaculated, sharply. "Something's bitten you! Was it a rattler, or—"

He broke off with a sharp oath, jerking his hand quickly back from where he had inserted it beneath the leather.

Across the back of his hand showed a long cut, already crimsoned with blood!

Quickly recovering, Harpe turned the sweat-guard around, revealing the slender, pointed blade of a pen-knife, which had been driven through the heavy leather, then snapped short off. With every motion of the stirrup, this cruel spur was raked against the sensitive hide, and more than a score of tiny cuts were to be found on investigation.

"Who did it? How? What for?" ejaculated the ranchman, his eyes all aglow, his brows contracted as he cast a fiery glance toward the spring where he had left his guest.

To have those thoughts instantly driven from his mind for the time being, by an even more startling discovery.

Rising above the point of rocks he noted the dense black smoke which can only come from a prairie fire, where the grass is not yet thoroughly cured on the stalk!

"Fire! Who—what—can that old idiot have—" broke in jerks from his black-bearded lips as he stared for a brief space at that significant signal.

Then the instincts of a stockman, whose fortunes may almost be said to depend on the safety of his grass, came to the surface, and he leaped into the saddle—to be almost thrown headlong as his tortured animal plunged and bucked beneath that cruel spur being driven into his very ribs.

Jordan Harpe leaped to the ground as swiftly as he had mounted, holding his horse with an iron grip. He flung the stirrup across the saddle, leaving the knife-blade still shining in the leather, then hurried back to where the other horse was staked out.

As he reached this and shifted his grip from rein to dangling end of the lariat, he made another discovery. Instead of having broken under the strain, the lasso had been cut nearly in twain by a keen, smooth-edged knife.

"That does settle it!" he grated, hastily changing the entire trail-ropes from horse to horse, and then mounting that lately ridden by Gregory Baird. "All this means more than a joke, and if the old man don't meet up with something worse than a spook, then he's too mighty lucky to live in this section—he just is, now!"

Swiftly as the ranchman moved and acted, all this consumed time, and before he could reach the point of rocks, riding one horse and leading the other, he was met by the ruddy flames, leaping along before the gentle breeze, but which seemed momentarily increasing.

Only for an instant did the hesitate. Then, shortening his grip on the rope of the led horse, hesped along the front of the fire, watching for a favorable point at which he might cross the lurid line, and so learn what had taken place near the spring.

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

ALTHOUGH the grass was of no great height, it formed a matted carpet which sent forth a fierce heat when once fairly ablaze, and though the fire itself was dangerous to nothing more than reptilian life, still the flames and the acrid smoke presented a barrier through and over which even a bold rider might well hesitate to dash.

It was nothing to be compared with the roaring, crackling, terrible furnace presented by a "weed prairie," and if crowded, a bold rider like Jordan Harpe would have plunged through the ugly lines at any one point without fear for aught more than singeing the legs of his charger.

Still, matters had not gone so far with him, as yet. Though he must have been blind indeed not to have suspected mischief brewing after what had happened, the loss of a minute or two could not make much difference.

"He's all right—of course he's all right!" came almost fiercely from his lips as a whirling cloud of smoke baffled the gaze which he sent in the direction of the spring while skirting the fire-front. "Went snake hunting, maybe, and let the fire get the start of him. Or else—Curse the luck, anyway!" with sudden rancor. "I just knew something would happen if I crossed the line onto this section!"

He reached a little strip of ground where the grass grew less thickly, and seemingly stirred up by that superstitious thought, he turned his horse and forced it straight into and across the line of fire, dragging the riderless animal after him.

The scent of scorching hair rose to his nostrils, and the two horses plunged and pranced a bit as their shoeless feet felt the over-heated ground; but that was little to an old stockman.

"Steady, lads! it's nothing when you get used to it, and— I say, pardner!" abruptly lifting his voice as he rose high in his stirrups to cast a keen look ahead.

The bushes and trees showed fresh and green just beyond the line of blackened dust which marked where the fire had started. He could see clear to the gray mass of rock from beneath which the waters of the cool spring gushed. He could even catch a partial view of the Haunted Ranch; but what he looked for was invisible.

He could see nothing of Gregory Baird, and there was an echo of uneasiness amounting to almost alarm in the call which he sent out in advance of his coming.

"I say, Baird!" he repeated, half-angrily, like one who refuses to entertain the dread which presented itself. "Show up, man! Where are ye hiding? Baird—Gregory Baird!"

There came no answer to his repeated calls, and with his bronzed face showing a strange

pallor above his jetty beard, Jordan Harpe urged his mount forward, sweeping the space before him with glowing eyes.

He reached the fringe of bushes without seeing or hearing aught to relieve his growing apprehension, and after one more sharp call, he sprung to the ground and pressed forward to the spring, near which the coals of the little camp-fire were still aglow.

This had not been scattered, and the ground immediately around the little heap was unscorched. The grass had taken fire more than a score yards away. Then how—

Paler than ever, Jordan Harpe glanced swiftly at the nearly bare stones around him; a soil which would hardly retain traces of a foot-fall, but on which a bloody spoor—

"Baird, I say!" he called forth in sharp tones, at the same time drawing a revolver. "O-h-h, Baird!"

Still no response, and with an ugly snarl the ranchman lifted the muzzle of his pistol, firing shot after shot in rapid succession.

With a hand that trembled perceptibly, Harpe opened the weapon and cast out the empty shells, replacing them with fresh cartridges taken from the belt about his middle. His head was slightly bent in listening, his gaze turned toward the location of the Uncanny Ranch, though the building itself was hidden from view.

Still there came no answer, either from voice or pistol, and after a brief period of hesitation, Jordan Harpe went back to the camp-fire as the proper starting point. There, if anywhere, he ought to be able to pick up the trail.

Yet he could hardly help knowing that this was a frail hope, at best, thanks to the nature of the ground. Even a shod horse might have passed back and forth without leaving a connected trail.

No doubt it was some such reflection as this that caused the ranchman to turn once more toward the Haunted Ranch and empty his pistol for the second time.

Mechanically he bent his head to listen for an answer, when he was given a great start by a clear call of:

"Hello, stranger! Playing Fourth of July all by your lonesome self?"

Jordan Harpe wheeled instantly, a hand dropping to the loaded revolver in his belt, a startled look in his eyes and upon his pale face.

He saw two horsemen, neither of them the one on whose account he was feeling so much uneasiness just then.

"Fire and fire-arms, both turned loose, regardless!" laughed the horseman in advance, tightening the reins as he came near the spring.

"Thought sure we'd run chuck-up against a circus, and so came swarming over this way to—Where's Gregory Baird?"

Jordan Harpe gave a start at this abrupt question, his lips curling back until a gleam of white teeth showed through the curtain of black hair. And his voice was more than usually harsh as he demanded:

"What do you know about— What do you mean, anyway?"

"Nothing to set your back up, stranger, I'm hoping," with a short, dry laugh, his bright eyes taking close note of that strangely pallid face. "Just heard you calling out such a name, and finding you here alone, it came natural to wonder who and what and where was this Gregory Baird. Did I hear you say anything, stranger?"

If he did, it was a partly smothered oath. Although it might have puzzled him to give a plausible reason why, Jordan Harpe had taken a dislike, strong as it was instinctive, to this glib-tongued stranger.

For stranger he was. The ranchman was confident on that point. He knew nearly every man for leagues around, and he knew he had never before come in contact with this person.

His garb, while suitable enough for riding, savored more of the far East than of the plains. His age must have been not far from thirty years. His face was handsome, after a strong, manly fashion, and his tall figure was that of an athlete.

Keeping to the rear, a half-grin on his sun-burnt face, a cowboy rig on his slouching figure, was a red-headed, red-bearded fellow of forty-odd years, who might have been serving the younger horseman as guide.

All this Jordan Harpe took in at a glance, and though his instinctive dislike grew still stronger, something told him he could not afford to pick a quarrel just then.

Smothering his real sentiments as well as might be, he gave a hasty account of what had happened, beginning with the break-away of his horse.

The stranger listened closely, his handsome face betraying little emotion, but his keen eyes fixed upon the face of the speaker with annoying pertinacity. It almost seemed as though he was waiting for a lie, plain enough to be nailed at once.

"Quite a romance, take it by and large. I'd want the papers to show for it, before venturing to sing such a song in company where I wasn't well known."

"Look for yourself," coldly retorted Harpe, leading the way to where his horses were stand-

ing, pointing out the broken knife-blade still fastened in the sweat-guard.

Fully as coolly the stranger inspected the ingenious spur, noting the brightness of the break, paying no attention to the angry impatience of the stockman as he poured forth question after question.

For a time Harpe answered these, though curtly as possible; but as they showed no signs of being exhausted, his hot temper broke bounds.

"Don't you think you're crowding it, just a little, Mr.— Who and what are you, anyway?"

"You can call me Kent Gladwin, for lack of a better handle, Mr. Harpe, and—"

"You know me, then?"

"Pat McQuery gave me your name, with a side nod toward the red-headed cowboy."

"Divil a wan o' me but what'd know ye twicet the len'th a naked oye c'u'd r'ache, yer 'Anner," bobbed the Irishman, his grin deepening in keeping with his bow to the master of the Square Ring Ranch.

"Button up, Pat!" curtly said Gladwin, then adding: "If by 'crowding' you mean I'm asking too many questions, Mr. Harpe, I reckon you'll have to get used to the like, unless Gregory Baird puts in an appearance to speak for you."

"Do you mean— What do you mean?" frowned the ranchman, falling back a pace or two, one hand dropping to the reloaded pistol at his waist.

"That a man like Gregory Baird can't disappear without questions being asked as to the how, the why, the wherefore. And of whom should those questions be asked, if not of the man who was last known to be in his company?"

"Do you claim the right to ask those questions, sir?"

"Only as a matter of curiosity. I never met Gregory Baird in my life, so I could hardly have a personal interest. Only—what puzzles me most is to find you reluctant to answer."

"I've told you all I know, and part of what I merely guess. Isn't that enough to satisfy a hog?"

"Let the hog answer for himself. As for myself, I don't mind saying that it looks mighty queer, to say the least."

"Things are not always what they look to be," with a sneer, his fingers toying with his pistol. "For instance, at first glance I took you for a gentleman!"

"I can give a still more striking instance that things are not always what they seem. For instance: I once saw your very moral standing in the dock, charged with murder!" coolly drawled Gladwin.

"What! do you mean to insinuate—"

"That you were that criminal? Oh, dear, no!" with exaggerated solicitude as the ranchman faced him fiercely. "For I believe that fellow was hung. Or—did he break jail before sentence was executed?"

Possibly Kent Gladwin never realized the full extent of his peril, in that moment. Whether so intended or not, those drawling words had sent the rancher's fiery temper up to boiling pitch, and his weapon was actually starting from its scabbard when the rapid thumping of horses' hoofs on the prairie came to the ears of the three men.

All eyes turned in that direction, though an instant's reflection would have told them this alarm could not have been caused by the man who had so mysteriously disappeared.

"Some others come to see the circus!" nodded Gladwin, as half a score horsemen came into sight around the rising ground. "If they're white, it ought to be easy enough to solve this enigma between us."

"They're from my ranch," said Harpe, his anger cooling quickly. "That's Martin Thompson, my foreman, in the lead. This way, lads!" lifting his voice and waving his broad-brimmed hat as an additional incentive.

"We ketched glimp' o' the smoke, boss, an' so come on the jump," cried the foreman as he came dashing up. "What set it a-gwine? Though it don't matter much, fer the kenyon 'll stop what's left o' it."

"That's what we've got to find out. Keep back, boys!" lifting a hand in warning. "Don't ride over the ground, for there ought to be a trail here somewheres. The old man has got lost, somehow!"

With a few crisp sentences Jordan Harpe explained what had taken place, as far as made known to the reader, and reserving their questions for a more suitable time, the cowboys alighted to search for some clew by which that annoying puzzle might be solved. But search as they might, such clew was lacking, thanks to the nature of the soil.

It seemed almost as though Gregory Baird had faded into thin air!

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE UNCANNY RANCH.

"It looks black—mighty black, boss!" muttered Martin Thompson, the foreman, staring at the burnt prairie as though his words were suggested by that sable coating of ashes.

"Then you think—"

"I hain't got so fur as thinkin', so to speak, boss," was the grim response. "Fer it don't take no thinkin' to see that fire was sot to kiver up sech trail as was left abind. Unless—don't reckon the old gent could 'a' sot the fire, then run off 'cause he got skeered?"

"It don't look plausible," frowned Harpe, tugging at his beard, then curling the crisp ends to thrust them between his teeth.

"Was Mr. Baird so nervous a character as that would indicate?" asked Gladwin, speaking for the first time since the coming of the cowboys.

Harpe flashed a scowling glance in that direction, but Thompson frankly admitted:

"Not ef his looks didn't fool himself mightily. Mebbe he run to let folks know they was a fire, though!"

"Hardly away from horses and a mate," smiled Gladwin, casting a quick glance out over the blackened prairie.

"The fire lay among 'em, don't fergit."

"I'm not. Neither the plain fact that he could easily have gained yonder hog-back of rocks, and from there joined Mr. Harpe without danger or trouble."

"Then you reckon?"

"As you said a bit since, I'm trying to labor that far. Just at present I'm up to my neck in Doubtful Bog."

The search was persisted in for fully an hour longer, with the same lack of success. Keeping all others back, Martin Thompson and an old, white-haired cowboy, the two keenest trailers in the party, inspected the ground around the spring, beneath the bushes, then still further back beyond where the fire had slowly eaten into the teeth of the wind. They went on all-fours, inspecting the ground foot by foot, almost inch by inch. But without hitting off aught that could be twisted into a trail such as might solve this strange vanishment by following it up.

While this was being done, Jordan Harpe vainly strove to hide his uneasiness, all the more doggedly, perhaps, from being conscious that Kent Gladwin was closely if covertly studying his face.

From the very outset he had taken a powerful dislike to this handsome stranger, instinctively feeling that in him he was fated to find a dangerous enemy, though he could hardly have given a reason for that conviction. It was one of those curious presentiments which, more often than not, prove true in the end.

Unless both words and looks lied, Gladwin suspected him of knowing more about this strange disappearance than his lips cared to admit; and even to a consciously innocent man, such a suspicion is worse than annoying.

As so often happens in the case of one wholly free from blame, too, Jordan Harpe could not conceal this belief, and his very efforts toward that end made his manner seem feverish and unnatural.

After the first few minutes, Kent Gladwin took no forward part in that fruitless hunt for sign, moving hither and yon without apparent aim, though his keen eyes were ever busy, his sharp ears constantly on the alert, catching up every word dropped in his vicinity.

As his seemingly idle movements carried him further away from the spring, they at length brought him within view of the deserted ranch, and though he did not openly inspect this, he made a mental note which was fated to bring forth strange fruit in the near future.

At length even Martin Thompson gave over the search as vain, now that the ground adjacent to the spring had been so thoroughly covered. Rising up to cast a glance toward the westerling sun, he shook his head slowly in answer to the silent query of the ranchman.

"Not even the ghost of a sign, boss!"

"Talking of ghosts, what's the matter with carrying our investigations yet a little further?" briskly interposed Gladwin, coming forward as he spoke. "There's a building of some sort over yonder, and—"

"The Haunted Ranch!" almost involuntarily shivered Harpe.

"Is that so? Then, all the more reason why we'd ought to pay that same ranch a visit of inspection!" declared Gladwin, positively.

"Why fer so?" frowned Thompson, his brows contracting.

"To see if we can't find our game there, of course! If rumor doesn't lie, this wouldn't be the first ugly mystery connected with that uncanny pile!"

There was no immediate response made to this speech. The cowboys interchanged quick glances. Some shrugged their shoulders, others moved a little closer together, and all seemed ill at ease.

"Divil a wan o' me's goin' thayre, annyhow!" blurted out Pat McQuery, with a dogged shake of his lurid topknot, at the same time falling back nearer the horses, as though providing means of flight.

"You're not a clean stranger in these parts, then?" slowly spoke up the foreman of the Square Ring, inspecting the new-comer more closely than he had thought of doing until now. "You've been in these parts before today?"

"It must have been in my dreams, then," bowed Gladwin, with just the hint of a smile flitting across his handsome face. "But all talk and no action never yet got a friend out of a tight box! We've exhausted this placer without striking color, and now I'm for exploring the bonanza over yonder!"

"You afore me, stranger!" said Thompson, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I'd rather dig fer gold-dust in a bone-yard—heap sight!"

"Now you're talkin', Mart!" nodded one of the cowboys, which brought forth a chorus of similar ejaculations.

Kent Gladwin's lip curled slightly as his gaze ran from face to face, but he could see that these fellows were in sober earnest. They might be bold enough under ordinary circumstances, but not one among them cared about daring the anger of the "haunts" which were popularly supposed to swarm beneath the dilapidated roof of that Uncanny Ranch.

"That's well enough, so far as it goes, gentlemen," added Gladwin, a dogged look coming into his face. "I don't take any stock in spirits, save such as I find in a bottle, jug or keg. I tell you this so you all can see I'm not making a bluff for cheap notoriety when I say that if none of you have got the sand to follow my lead, I'll search that shack on my own hook."

"Wait a bit, stranger," called out Thompson, as Gladwin turned in the direction of the uncanny ranch. "Ef you're dead-bent on gwine in yender— Be ye, though?"

"I certainly am. Why shouldn't I be?"

"But what cause have you to think aught concerning Gregory Baird is to be learned by such an investigation?" asked Harpe.

"I don't know that there is aught to be found out," was the cool response. "I do know that there's naught to be discovered here, though. And for that reason I say we're bound in common humanity to neglect no chance, however faint or far-fetched it may seem. Unless, of course, you can supply positive reasons for passing that building by."

"I know of none," curtly growled Harpe, flushing hotly beneath that steady gaze. "But it don't seem reasonable to think—"

"Did the old gent know what-fer place it am, boss?" asked Thompson.

"I told him—yes."

"An' he didn't skeer at the ha'nts?"

"He said he didn't believe in any such truck."

The foreman tugged thoughtfully at his black mustache, dropping his eyes to the ground like one in a study. Clearly enough he was not entirely free from superstition, so far as that deserted ranch was concerned; but equally clear was it that he failed to see how he could with justice to the missing man, refuse to search the uncanny place.

"I reckon I'll keep ye comp'ny, stranger, though it's like pullin' eye-teeth 'ith hot pinchers!" he said, with a forced smile, looking up to meet the gaze of the other. "An' whar Mart Thompson leads, thar's more'n one good boy'll foller—eh, lads?"

Several gave assent, though with precious little enthusiasm in either face or voice; but that seemed enough for the foreman, and in a very few minutes more the party was mounted and advancing on the building which had received such an uncanny reputation.

Thompson took the lead, seemingly as a matter of course. Gladwin did not care to dispute this right, seemingly content that the search was about to be made.

Jordan Harpe also moved forward, and only Pat McQuery actually refused to go nearer than a long stone's-throw from the ranch. But even while busied in searching the dirty, ill-smelling, bare interior, Gladwin took note that the owner of the Square Ring Ranch kept very close to the front door, which had been left wide open.

"I was wrong: he really is afraid of spooks!" mentally decided the handsome sport, with that decision losing a trifle of the vague suspicion which had come into his brain while noting the uneasy actions and troubled looks of the ranchman.

As the search of the deserted ranch progressed without aught being seen, heard or felt of "haunts," the cowboys seemed to gather courage and enter with interest into the quest.

Lights were improvised, rude yet sufficient for their purpose, by aid of which the uncanny place was searched from roof to sills. Mart Thompson took the lead, as by common consent, and every foot of the visible space was inspected, but without the party being any the wiser for their trouble.

In one place a dull, ugly stain was brought to light, such as might have been caused by a pool of blood; but that must have been shed long years before, and could have nothing to do with the present case.

After the first regular search was made, during which the party kept pretty well together, evidently feeling that in union there was a better prospect for safety, each man went it on his own hook. But in the end all came to the same conclusion: wherever Gregory Baird might be just then, he certainly was not to be found inside that ranch.

"It was a fool's idea at the best!" ejaculated

Jordan Harpe, filling his lungs with a long breath when once from under that roof. "He couldn't have been lugged here against his will without a trail being left plain enough for picking up. And he surely wouldn't have hidden himself here of his own free will."

"What ye reckon could 'a' come o' him, then, boss?" asked Mart.

"It beats me—beats me all to pieces!" frowned the ranchman.

"Mebbe he 'lowed the fire'd drive ye crost the kenyon, an' he tuck out fer the ford to cut ye off, boss," ventured one of the cowboys.

"An' not hittin' of ye thar, picked up his buffs an' struck out fer the Square Ring!" eagerly supplemented another.

This hardly seemed probable, but since all other ideas had failed to "pan out" acceptably, Jordan Harpe reluctantly caught at that frail hope.

"That must have been the size of it!" he ejaculated, striding to where his horse stood waiting, and twisting the broken knife-blade out of the sweat-guard, he vaulted into the saddle and rode away from the Haunted Ranch at a brisk trot.

The search had been so prolonged that darkness had for some little time fallen over the earth, which may account for the fact that no one seemed to notice the absence of Kent Gladwin until the river was almost reached. Then it was Jordan Harpe who cried out:

"Where's that fresh stranger? He isn't with us—is he?"

"Waal, I be durned!" drawled Thompson, after a vain inspection of the party. "He hain't hyar, sure 'nough!"

"Ow-wow!" faintly howled Pat McQuery, the red-headed guide. "Sure, an' the spooks hev gobbled av 'im up! An' me pay not ped, na'ther!"

"Luck to their bargain, then!" cried Jordan Harpe, viciously, touching up his horse and dashing down the steep cut to the brawling stream which ran along the bottom of the high-walled canyon.

CHAPTER V.

HOW THE TRICK WAS TURNED.

WHEN Jordan Harpe called out that there could be no dangerous enemy concealed among the bushes, his guest, Gregory Baird, had about reached the same conclusion.

Whatever might have caused that break-away, it could hardly have been either man or beast, else how had it or they vanished so quickly, so completely? Not by flight, for neither could have left that patch of undergrowth, limited in extent, without exposure to their eyes. Not by hiding, since the cover was not dense enough to long baffle two pair of keen eyes like those which pierced the shelter from side to side.

As the most likely solution, Gregory Baird accepted that offered by the ranchman; a snake must have struck at, if not, actually bitten, the frightened horse.

Instead of immediately returning to his interrupted lunch, Baird stood watching the owner of the Square Ring Ranch as he trotted out in the direction of the rocky point, arranging the trail-rope for use as a lasso as he went.

His brief excitement had subsided, though he had not yet replaced the pistol in its scabbard. There was only a lazy interest in his eyes as he followed the horseman, but a slight sneer was beginning to curl his mustached lips.

"He don't look like it, but—a man *must* be a coward who takes stock in such silly notions!" he muttered, hardly conscious that he was forming the syllables aloud. "Ghosts! in this age and—bah!"

As Jordan Harpe receded, Gregory Baird withdrew his gaze, breaking off with an ejaculation of contempt, if not for his host, for his host's ridiculous superstition.

Still, he did not return at once to his cooling coffee. The final words of warning from the lips of the ranchman were ringing in his ears, and as he was an inordinate hater of all the serpent tribe, he cocked his revolver and entered the bushes, peering here and there in quest of the snake which had alarmed the mustang.

He was fated to disappointment so far as finding the serpent was concerned, but he made a discovery which he could by no means have anticipated.

Near the edge of the bushes, only a few feet from where Jordan Harpe had stood while dragging his reluctant horse toward him, those closely-searching eyes were arrested by the gleam of a bit of white paper, folded as though it had once been the inclosure of an envelope.

What would have been passed over without thought or notice in a more populous location, became of strong interest here, and Gregory Baird started forward, for the time being forgetting what he had been searching for.

"A letter—something Harpe dropped, no doubt!" he muttered, picking up the paper, turning it over, to see that neither side bore address or other indication of ownership. "Wonder if it's worth saving?"

Without the remotest idea of acting dishonorably, or thought of prying into another's secrets, Baird unfolded the half-sheet of paper to glance

at the heading; and to utter a low cry of angry wonder as he caught sight of his own name in plain, bold characters!

Almost at a glance he took in the brief contents, then cast a half-puzzled, half-menacing look toward the point of rocks behind which Jordan Harpe was just passing from sight.

"Did he—could he be such a cur?"

No longer thinking of the possible snake, Gregory Baird turned back to the little camp-fire, that bit of paper crumpled tightly in his hand, his brows gathered above his glowing eyes in a fashion that lent unusual sternness to his strong, comely face.

He took up his cup of coffee and sipped its contents, but the action was purely mechanical. His thoughts were centered on that strangely-delivered note; for both heading and body plainly showed the whole had been meant for his eyes and his alone.

Smoothing out the crumpled paper, his eyes once more ran over the bold characters, this time with more deliberation.

"GREGORY BAIRD, Esq.:"

"If you are the wise man rumor calls you, think twice before you act once. Make sure you know what you are paying for, before you put good money into a ring, square or otherwise."

"Eyes open. Trust nobody. There's evil plotting, and the prime object stands in shoes just fitted to your feet."

"A word to the wise ought to be sufficient, but if not—ask your host what he knows about the Uncanny Ranch!"

"G. G.:"

Thus the warning ran.

Plain enough, so far as it went; but why did it not go further? Why take the trouble to write at all, if the author was afraid to put his meaning in terms that could not be misinterpreted?

Almost as soon as this question flitted across his brain, Gregory Baird found a fitting answer: because the writer feared his warning might fall into other hands than those for which it was clearly intended!

"And so it did!" he muttered, with a dark frown, flashing a glance over the brown prairie toward the point of rocks behind which Jordan Harpe had disappeared. "Into his hands—confound his impudence! How dare he open—if it came by mail, how did he get his claws on it, I'd like to know?"

Mechanically Baird turned the paper over, to see if the dating or canceling stamp had left any impress through a probable envelope. No such sign was visible, and once more he bent his head frowningly over the lines or warning.

So entirely was he absorbed in this puzzle, that he paid no attention to what was going on in his close vicinity, though so little noise was made that only an accident could have put him on guard, even with his senses on the full alert.

Not far from the further edge of the bushes, where the land lay lowest, forming a shallow gully, thick-strewn with stones and rocks, a flat slab of rock was being lifted at one end from under which a hatless head slowly protruded two bright, bead-like eyes peering through the dingy foliage toward the little camp-fire.

Bit by bit the slab was lifted higher, until a human being glided forth from the cunning covert, with a snake-like movement. The rock was lowered behind him, and one hand noiselessly scattered gravel to mask the edges, as before.

This done, the fellow crept as silently as a spirit, keeping close to the ground and under cover as much as possible, until within a few yards of where Gregory Baird was crouching over the warning note.

Pausing only long enough to gather his long, bony legs under his gaunt body, the knave lifted a hand and made a swift motion toward the rocks back of the camp, and then doubled up still more, looking not unlike a dirty, ragged lump of turf and leaves.

He was fairly well covered from view of the man beside the fire, but he was not kept long in peril of discovery. In answer to his signal, another figure crept into view, slowly swinging a coiled lasso about his head as he moved clear of the rocks, his glittering eyes fixed upon the unsuspecting speculator in front.

Without a warning sound the loop shot forward and settled over the head and shoulders of the ranchman's guest. The wielder of the *riata* drew back with a powerful jerk, cutting short the cry of alarm which rose in Baird's throat, hurling him backward, bringing his head with an ugly thump against a near-by stone.

At the same instant the fellow who had writhed from under the slab, sprang forward, spreading out a coarse army blanket as he did so. With a deftness that proved long practice or close study, this was wrapped tightly around the prostrate man's head and neck, completely blinding as well as muffling him.

"Lively—hurry up, pard!" buskily cried the man with the lasso, hopping awkwardly about, shifting feet much after the fashion of the old-time "trained turkey," whose terpsichorean education consisted of a beated bottom to its cage. "Ef Harpe gits back afore—"

"Who's runnin' this, Goggles?" casting a half-angry, half-mocking glance toward the other, whose always protuberant eyes now seemed on the point of falling out of their sockets.

"Ain't I holpin' of it? An' ain't I got jest as many lives to lose as you dast hev, ef that black-mug should come back afore we're ready?"

The knave thus indignantly addressed, jerked the lasso from the hairy paws of his mate, using a portion of it to wind about the arms of their motionless captive before deigning a reply. Then, rising to his feet, and stretching his bony limbs like one who has been kept in an uncomfortably cramped position for some time, he cast a careless glance toward the point of rocks, showing his yellow teeth as he said:

"Don't ye git skeered afore the time comes, Goggles. Harpe ain't gwine fer to come back in too big a rush. Ef ye got any dingbats to stack up ag'in' it, I'll go bail he won't show his black mug afore we-all's good and ready he should! Now, thar!"

With mouth opened almost as widely as his light, fishy eyes, Goggles drank in these confident words. Then his jaws closed with a click like that of a spring trap, to part again with:

"Holy smoke, Silent Jackson! You don't mean fer to say that Jordan Harpe is the boss? You don't mean fer—"

"Shet trap—you!" hissed the other knave, with a warning gesture toward their captive, who was beginning to stir with returning consciousness. "I don't mean to say nothin'. I don't mean he's my boss. Ef you think it, jest you ax him, next time!"

"Ketch me!" grimaced the man with the pop-eyes.

"It'd be your last ketchin', I'm stackin' up," grinned his mate, at the same time making a motion which Goggles was not slow to interpret.

Fastening upon Gregory Baird, paying no attention to his feeble struggles, the two ruffians bore him away from the fire, dropping him rudely on the stones at the foot of the rocky mass before mentioned.

"You know what comes next—git about it, critter!" growled the rascal called Silent Jackson, returning to the camp-fire and lighting a short piece of tarred rope, then striding swiftly along the edge of the grass, setting fire to it in a dozen places.

Goggles imitated his actions, and when the fire was fairly under headway, each fellow cast his bit of rope over the line of flames, to fall in the thick grass where they would be entirely consumed without leaving any tell-tale traces behind.

Silent Jackson, a sardonic grin wrinkling his lantern-jaws, paused to peer through the rapidly thickening veil of black smoke, but his mate was less at ease, and turned to look toward their captive.

"Look out, pard!" he spluttered, as he saw that Gregory Baird had worked one hand free, and was tearing desperately at the blanket which was threatening his suffocation. "The durned critter's 'most loose a'ready!"

More prompt to act, Silent Jackson drew a sausage-like bag of buck-kin from beneath his belt, leaping forward and striking a cruel blow at that muffled head.

As yet hardly conscious, only feeling that some horrible object was blinding and strangling him, Gregory Baird felt that blow—felt as though the sky was dropping upon his poor head! His free hand was flung out, the fingers quivering convulsively; then they lay limp and nerveless.

How long a time elapsed before his senses began to come back, and he grew dimly aware that he was still alive, the luckless prisoner had no means of deciding.

His body was doubled up in a cramped position, yet he was in motion all the time—a motion which was wholly involuntary on his part. He tried to move his limbs, but vainly. He sought to cry out, but a spell seemed upon his tongue.

From side to side, then up and down, forward and back, that curious motion seemed to sway his person. Then came a painful thump as though he had been dropped from a considerable height. And then the motion was renewed, and he seemed to be lowered by jerks down a wall or pit!

Then the rope seemed to break, and he shot down swiftly!

CHAPTER VI.

SILENT JACKSON EXPLAINS.

To a man in his peculiar situation, half-stunned, nearly suffocated by the closely wrapped blanket, helpless at the mercy of unknown enemies, one's bewildered brain is apt to run riot; and so it was with Gregory Baird on this occasion.

He had no accurate sense of time. He fancied that minutes passed by during his descent by jerks, now bumping against a rough wall or the perpendicular face of a cliff. He felt that he had been lowered through an immense distance before the rope—surely he was suspended by some such means?—broke—or, did the carelessly tied knot come untied?

Not the least curious part of it all was that he could think of such comparative trifles as this, even while feeling that death by being dashed to atoms was but a question of seconds.

He knew that his means of suspension, what-

ever that was, had given way, for, from lying doubled up as in a sack, his body straightened out and his limbs had comparative freedom.

The breath seemed driven out of his lungs by the horrible rapidity with which he shot downward: down, down, for rods, and—surely he had already fallen at least a mile!

Then came the shock of touching bottom; a shock that ought, by all rights, to have crushed him to a shapeless pulp. Instead—he seemed to alight as upon a mountain of feathers! And yet—surely that was a point of rock pressing against his spine?

Before the bewildered captive could disentangle his disordered wits, he caught the muffled sounds of human voices close beside him, and felt the rude grasp of fingers closing on his person.

He could not make out the words, nor could he understand just what was being done with him, further than that, after being pushed and dragged for a space, he was picked up, head and feet, and borne a considerable distance, to be finally dumped on a rocky floor that felt cold and damp to the touch.

Then the owners of those unseen hands removed the lasso, the muffling blanket, and he found himself blinking confusedly at a dull red light.

A slight stir a bit to one side attracted his attention, and he made out the shape of a human being squatting on its heels, elbows on knees and joined palms supporting a slowly wagging chin.

"Evenin', pardner," croaked this being, in coarse, husky accents.

"Hope I see ye!"

With a desperate effort Gregory Baird brought himself to a sitting posture, staring at the speaker, struggling hard to clear his bemused wits sufficiently to realize all that had transpired, as well as his present situation.

"What—how—" he began, only to be cut short by Silent Jackson.

"Which, why, an' howsomever? Ef not, why not? An' so on—eh?" the rascal grinned, throwing back his head far enough to relieve the pressure on his chin and enable him to shoot a stream of tobacco-juice past the captive, to splash audibly against the rock wall.

The moisture drying up in his eyes, Baird was enabled to see more clearly, and his wits likewise cleared up. Fancies gave place to facts, and he began to realize that he had fallen into evil hands.

He flashed a quick glance around that dimly-lighted space. He saw that he was in a cavern of some description. He saw that Silent Jackson was well-armed, for the red light glanced back from knife-haft and pistol-butts at his waist. But—he was only one man, and that glance revealed none others.

"Don't ye be sech a fool, pardner!" croaked the knave, reading aright the meaning of that glance and stealthy up-gathering of legs. "I'm jest the most lamby sort o' wolf ye ever pulled the tail of, when I'm in a good humor; but I do hate fer to hev—Stiddy, durn ye!"

His voice lifted sharply, for he saw that his prisoner meditated an attack. He added a shrill whistle, which brought half a dozen armed men out of the darkness into the edge of the light, each one holding a business-like Winchester at a ready.

"F'r instance: ye kin see how the cat jumps your ownself, pardner," chuckled Silent Jackson, with a wave of his hand toward this armed force. "Mebbe they hain't quite as purtyes they might look ef they didn't hev to keep thar mugs all bundled up fer to guard ag'inst the toothache, but they're p'izen ole business, all the same! Ef I say let blizzer, lads, what would be the consequences?"

"He wouldn't hev time to kick, even once!" came a deep-toned voice from one of those masked shapes.

"An' he ain't nigh ready fer to be made sech a skimmer out of, so I reckon you kin fall back, gents," politely bowed the gaunt rascal, with the addition:

"Not too fur, ye understand, but jest fur 'nough."

"What are they? What are you? Why have I been treated so outrageously?" demanded Baird, forcing himself to speak slowly and with outward composure.

"Kin chin, cain't ye?" croaked Silent Jackson with an amused chuckle sounding deep down in his throat. "Shell I answer 'em all in a jumble, or kin you wait fer me to take 'em one at a bite?"

Little by little the captive was recovering from his harsh treatment. He had seen enough to know that any attempt at violence could only make matters worse for him, even should he escape with his life.

It went sorely against the grain to even think of speaking placably to a miserable knave like this fellow squatting before him; for every line of that ill-favored visage declared the rascal, ruffian and cut-throat. But this was not the first time he had found himself in an awkward predicament, not the first time he had fallen among thieves, and as a man of the world he knew how to conform himself to his surroundings.

He took note of the fact that while all the other men wore shapeless masks—bag-like hoods that came to their shoulders, with mere slits for their eyes and mouths—over their faces, his immediate guard took no such precaution against future recognition.

"Beca'se I'm too dug-gun purty!" chuckled Silent Jackson, rightly interpreting that look. "Or, mebbe, beca'se I ain't skeered o' your ever hev'n the chaine fer to 'scribe my fortygraph to jedge or jury!"

There was a wicked leer in his snake-like eyes, a malicious grin on his gaunt, leathery visage as he spoke thus. And, strong man though he was, Gregory Baird could not entirely check the cold thrill that crept along his spine.

"Then, ag'in," continued the guard, in pleasant tones, "I reckon you 'nd me 'll be mates long 'nough fer sech hot love to grow atwixt the couple o' us, that you'd rather bite yer own head off then to work hurt to sech as me—yes, I jest does, now, fer keeps!"

His tongue rattled along so glibly, like one who is over-fond of hearing his own tones, that Gregory Baird began to take fresh hope.

Might he not be able to learn why and for what reason he had been assaulted after such a shameful fashion? Could he not lead this knave into disclosing at least a portion of the truth?

"You say you're my friend," he ventured, deeming it best to feel the way before him with some caution.

"Ef ye never hed 'nother one in the hull wide world, pardner, still ye'd be richer off then many o' them as kin count up a hull rijiment o' common truck—ye jest would, now!" modestly declared the knave.

"Rather rough treatment to give a friend, don't you think?"

"That's 'cordin' to how ye looks at it, pardner," nodded Silent Jackson. "Ef we'd jest jumped an' axed ye to come 'long with us, reckon ye'd 'a' done it—eh?"

"Possibly not, without you gave good reasons for the invitation," reluctantly admitted Baird.

"An' ef we'd 'a' said a mighty likely young leddy was jest honin' fer to see ye—would ye 'a' come, regardless?"

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Baird, with wide-open eyes.

"See?" with an out-flinging of one hand. "Skittish jest at the naked idee! An' so I knowed it, fu'st glimp' I ketched o' the face o' ye. An' so—sence the purty leddy said 'fetch him,' we jest fetched!"

"What lady? Bah!" with a frown of disgust at his momentary credulity. "You're lying, man!"

"Cross my heart, boss!" solemnly declared Silent Jackson, suiting the action to his words. "They's a bit o' frost ketched into the wool o' ye, I ain't denyin'. They's a few wrinkles, an' sich, markin' the trail o' years over the hide o' ye. Mebbe ye've growed a bit more o' bay winder then ye used to tote in front. Nur I ain't sayin' ye're jest as straight an' soople in the back as ye was a gueration ago. But—an' that's spelt with great big letters a foot high, ye want to know! BUT—thar's plenty o' charm an' fascination an' sich-like into the git-up o' ye fer to—in a word, the pritty young leddy is so mighty dead stuck onto the shape o' ye that—"

"Drop it, you lying knave!" angrily snapped the prisoner, flushing hotly, no longer doubting that he was maliciously played with.

"Then you won't hev the young leddy part, pardner?"

"Not if it was truth, instead of a lie—no!"

"All right: lie goes," placidly nodded Silent Jackson. "They ain't no young leddy, an' they never was none. I jest wanted to let ye down easy a bit—see?"

"Will you tell me why I have been taken prisoner, then?"

"Why not?" with his black eyes opening in mild surprise. "Ain't that what I'm hyar fer? Ain't I jest sootherin' ye off a bit, so's ye'll take it easy, not to hurt? An' ef ye're good an' ready fer the naked truth, why—be ye?"

"If such a thing as truth can come out of your mouth—yes!"

"Which mought be tuck as an insult, ef I was anyways tetchy, pardner," gravely nodded Silent Jackson, renewing his quid by twisting a mighty mouthful from a long plug of black tobacco. "Ef I ever knowed how to tell a lie, I clean fergot the way afore I was pupped. Which, bein' so, ef I tell ye anythin' at all, ye kin mark it down as truer'n gospel."

"Will you tell me why I have been brought here, then?" demanded Baird once more, though his hopes of gaining any reliable information had well-nigh died out.

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated Silent Jackson, his face the picture of surprised reproach. "Would ye hev us let ye lay out yender, fer the coyotes to pick the bones o' ye? An' ye tuck with a fit? Struck down by the hand o'—"

"By your hand, or that of some infernal villain like you!" hotly flashed Baird, unable to contain his passions longer. "What for? Is it in hopes of gaining money?"

"Softly, pardner!" croaked the knave in warning, with a significant nod toward the quarter where those armed masks had faded

from view. "You wouldn't begin fer to believe how powerful narvous them critters out yender is! Set 'em on the jump, an' I reckon they fill ye too mighty full o' holes not to clean sp'ile yer bellers!"

"Did you bring me here with the expectation of extorting money by way of ransom, I ask you again?" persisted Baird, though in lower tones.

"Money's good; a powerful good thing to hev in the house," nodded Jackson, resuming his former position.

"I'll give you all I've got with me, if you will—"

"Which wouldn't break the back o' my hand 'long o' the weight of the pile, pardner," chuckled the rascal, grinning broadly, as Baird ran one hand into his bosom in search of his pocket-book.

"You've stolen—"

"Jest tuck; call it tuck, pardner," placidly interposed the man of silence. "They do say as how hard words never broke no bones, but to my sart'in knowledge they've clean bu'sted up more'n one pardnership. Jest tuck, to make sure ye didn't lose the weasel-skin in that fit as over-ketched ye so turrible sudden."

"If it's money you want, why—" began Baird, smothering his hot indignation as best he might; but before he could say more, a rough-clad fellow dashed hurriedly into the chamber, crying out:

"Hell to pay, pard! Gang comin', ropes in both hands! Gag that critter, then stan' ready fer business!"

CHAPTER VII.

A CRY OF DISTRESS.

ON that same afternoon, just as the sun was sinking out of sight, the stage from Vaquero came rattling into Longhorn, putting on a feeble attempt at style for the "wind up," though the tough, sun-burnt cheeks of the driver, honest John Jones, turned a shade ruddier and almost tingled as a stray boy gave a yell of enthusiastic approval.

It was a woeful come-down, this, from the palmy "days of old, the days of gold, the days of 'Forty-nine!" Team, vehicle, wind-up, audience, enthusiasm, and above all, driver; what were they in comparison with those by-gone, never-to-come-back days when—

With a snort of utter disgust, John Jones "yanked" up his jaded team in front of the stage office, dropped ribbons and whip, tumbled from the front seat, pulled the brim of his dusty hat down over his eyes, then slouched off through the gathering twilight, to drown his regrets for the past in a mug or two of foaming beer.

"Holler an' be darned!" he growled, as the clerk yelled something after him. "I can't bear ye!"

The growl turned into something which was almost a sigh, as John Jones recalled the fair face, sweet voice and pleasant manners of one of his passengers.

"An' she said she wanted—anyway, her brother wanted—to be dumped at the Gilsey House," his shuffling steps slowing up a bit. "An' did I know whar that was? An' would I be so—Billy-be-durned ef I do, though!" lurching forward with such violence as to nearly upset a portly man with whom he came in contact at the corner. "An' her a-axin' was this like the way we used fer to Overland it! This! A durned ole dimmyerat rattle-trap! A span o' stringy-tailed rats which—Ef I don't git drunker'n a b'iled owl, I'm a flounder, changed at nuss!"

Meanwhile, the two passengers to whom John Jones made brief allusion in his disgusted soliloquy, were making the best of it, though just a bit taken aback at the start.

"We wanted to be dropped at the Gilsey House," explained Victor Baird to the clerk, who emerged from his den at the sound of rattling wheels and rustily creaking springs. "The driver said—"

"I'm not the driver, and—ah!" with an amusing change of tone as he caught sight of a fair face back of those broad shoulders. "Beg pardon, ma'am, but did I understand you to say Gilsey House?"

Flora Baird bowed, her sense of the humorous too keen to risk speech just then, but reinforced by that bright smile, this was more than sufficient.

"I'll drive—take you there in a minute—just as soon as not—and a leetle rather, ma'am!" declared the clerk, springing to the seat and assuming the tools abandoned by John Jones. "Hope Jones didn't make himself too awfully offensive, though? Good fellow at bottom, but will crook the elbow—drink, you understand, ma'am," twisting his head about for another look at that winsome face.

It was averted, now, gazing out at the irregular buildings past which their course led them. Chatting amicably with a quaint, old-time character like the original driver was one thing, with this greasy-haired, curled-mustache, cigarette-flavored monkey was another. And though she did not even deign him a fleeting glance, Flora

Baird managed to "freeze" the young fellow as only a lady knows how.

Victor Baird was a little more "come-at-able," but though his answers came readily enough, when analyzed they afforded precious little information; and when he came to sum it all up, master clerk was honest enough to dub himself an idiot for his pains.

Still, he brought brother and sister safely to their present destination, and drove away with thanks as payment, to get rid of the other passengers.

Victor Baird registered and asked for rooms, Flora meanwhile waiting in the dingy, kitchen-flavored "parlor" hard by. There was no difficulty about supplying all that was wanted: slack season, just at present, the landlord volunteered while the young man was glancing over the signatures adorning the fly-specked and streaked page, near the bottom of which the ink was still fresh from his own pen.

The name for which he was searching did not show upon that page, and he turned the leaf back: to catch sight of the familiar characters, at last; but under a date more than two weeks past.

"None of your guests forget to register, of course?" asked Baird, looking up at the broad red face on the other side of the railing.

"If they should, I'm here to remind 'em," laughed the landlord, giving a knowing wink by way of pointing his meaning. "Looking for anybody in particular, Mr.—" twisting his short neck in an effort to make out the latest signatures. "Baird? Baird? Seems like I know the name, but—"

Turning the leaf and book as well, the young man pointed out the bold signature of "Gregory Baird," then asking:

"Is he not stopping with you at present?"

"Him? I recall the gent now—mighty queer I could forget the name, even for a moment! Couldn't forget the owner, though! Never met up with a more perfect gent in— Stopping here, you say?"

"I expected to meet him here, yes. This is the Gilsey House, is it not?" asked Victor, with a touch of haughtiness which few young men could assume more gracefully or with a better effect.

"Sure! And I'm old man Gilsey, one of the pioneers which— No, sir, I'm sorry to say, the giner I isn't favoring us at present."

Young Baird frowned darkly, pinching his under lip with nervous fingers, seemingly at a momentary loss. True, he had no positive word that Gregory Baird, his and Flora's father, would be to meet them at the Gilsey House, but his letters had borne that heading, and so had the telegram which had been the prime cause of their making this hasty journey.

"Supper'll be ready 'bout as quick as the lady, captain," the landlord volunteered, as Victor Baird turned away from the desk.

"Can't you send it up to her room? I'll take my chances later."

"Sure! glad to do anything to oblige a friend of the giner! And we can feed two as easy as one; better make it that, eh?"

"All right; supper for two; tea and coffee, please," nodded the young man, passing along to where his sister was waiting for his return.

"Father—not yet?" her bright face clouding as she saw only Victor.

"Not yet; reckon we took him unawares by our sudden starting."

"But he distinctly said to come without delay!"

Victor nodded assent, producing the bit of yellow paper and reading once more the few words which had brought them to this out-of-the-way region. There was no mistake; after date line and address, there were the words:

"Come here without delay. Bring F. Important. GREGORY BAIRD."

Victor put away the dispatch, as before.

"Of course it's all right," he said, with a little laugh, assumed more to chase the shadow from Flora's face than because he felt particularly merry. "The laugh will be on our side, when father finds us ahead of him."

"He will come? There is—surely there can be nothing gone wrong with him?" her voice faltering at the mere idea.

"Don't grow foolish, sis! What could go wrong? Why, we ought to be glad instead of sorry, for—don't you see?—his important business must have grown light, else he surely would have been awaiting us, in place of keeping us waiting."

Thanks to the necessity for reassuring his sister, Victor found arguments which caused his own vague uneasiness to temporarily die away, and by the time the landlord put in an appearance to say that supper had been taken to their rooms, brother and sister were quite ready to do it full justice.

While eating, in Flora's room, they talked the matter over, and while deciding that it was far too early to feel any particular uneasiness, it was agreed that, after supper, Victor should go out and call at such other hotels as the town afforded.

"It's just possible that he changed his quarters, not recalling the fact of dating his dispatch from the Gilsey House."

That was only one of the various solutions suggested. They knew their father was thinking seriously of investing a considerable sum in the cattle-growing business. He had spoken in his letters of more than one promising opening in that region; one in particular, a ranch belonging to one Jordan Harpe, lying to the northwest of Longhorn, which he intended giving a closer examination, though (he added) the price asked was rather more than he had thought of investing.

They had about concluded he was intending to buy this ranch, and as both brother and sister possessed a fortune in their own right, thanks to the death-bed kindness of an eccentric relative who had no particular love for their father, a consultation might be thought essential before he attempted to raise the full amount.

Doubtless he was out at this "Square Ring Ranch," and had been belated in driving or riding over to town.

Having finished supper, Victor took his hat and left the room, promising Flora not to linger longer than he could help.

"I'll tell the landlord to be sure and send father up, should he come before I complete the tour," he added, with a light laugh, which seemed to indicate a far lighter heart than he really bore in his bosom.

The delay on this occasion had been plausibly accounted for, but why was there nothing to show that Gregory Baird had been at the hotel from whence he had dated that message? Since the landlord seemed to remember his signature so well, why could he not recall the presence of the writer on a still more recent occasion?

Cutting short mine host's questions as to how the supper suited them, Victor bluntly asked him what other hotels there were in town, such as a gentleman would be likely to put up at, even for a night?

"There's two places where a man might stand it for a night, but for a lady—" stiffly began the landlord, to be cut short by Victor.

"We are not thinking of leaving, my dear sir. Everything is perfectly comfortable here, I assure you. Only—I know Mr. Gregory Baird was in Longhorn on the 9th of this month, and of course he must have put up at some hotel. If you could direct me—"

"Here, you Cub!" roared the landlord, adding to Baird: "He ain't so much for looks, is Cub, but he knows every crook and turn in town, and— Show this gent the other hotels, boy!"

While the lad was receiving his orders, Victor picked out a few cigars from the open box (to be given to Cub, later) on the desk, as a further peace-offering to the landlord. Then the young man followed his dirty, impish guide out into the town.

Both hotels were visited, at neither of which any information could be gleaned concerning Gregory Baird. His signature was not to be found on either register, nor could those in attendance remember any guest answering to the description given them.

On reaching the second place, Victor discharged Cub from further duty, knowing that, though now quite dark, he could readily find his way back to the Gilsey House, and not exactly fancying such a disreputable looking companion.

Foiled at the second place, Victor Baird turned toward the Gilsey House, sorely perplexed, his anxiety increasing until it grew positively painful. He could not understand it at all. Surely Gregory Baird must have been in Longhorn on the 9th, and being there, could hardly have left it immediately after wiring them?

In his moody thoughts, Victor unconsciously strayed from the direct course, entering a darker street, where he was startled by a shrill, girlish cry for help! And almost immediately catching sight of struggling shapes, he darted forward, sending out a hard fist which knocked a man back, to drop to his knees, while his left arm lent support to a feminine figure.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOUBLE-BANKED.

It all took place with the rapidity and smoothness of a shifting scene in a pantomime.

Young and hot-blooded, with that girlish cry for help ringing in his ears, Victor Baird did not stop to ask questions, nor to apologize for "chipping in" without an introduction.

By the indistinct light he saw that a girl, or young woman, was struggling to free herself from the arms of a man. The fellow was in the act of clapping a hand over her mouth, too busily engaged in his dastardly work to take heed of those swift, springy footfalls. If he heard them at all, it was too late to defend himself.

Straight from the shoulder came that blow, backed up by the weight of his body and the impetus of his rush. The fist struck true to its aim, knocking the fellow's head back until it seemed as though his neck would snap before the shock; a stroke that would have laid nineteen out of every twenty men out limp and nerveless, and did send this sturdy fellow reeling back, to drop upon his hands and knees.

At the same time Victor caught the girl about the waist, saving her from a fall, draw-

ing her back a pace or two while he gave assurance:

"Don't scream—the rascal can't hurt you now!"

Though neither had so arranged it, chance turned the face of the young lady upward, resting against his shoulder, and though the light was so dim, Victor could not help seeing enough to assure him that, if not actually a beauty, he had been thrown into contact with a remarkably comely person!

If the case had been otherwise; if she had been a middle-aged woman, or even an ordinary looking maiden: our young knight would hardly have been so reckless and off his guard; for this was not the first time he had come into contact with roughs and thugs.

He knew he had struck hard and straight enough to "knock out" the majority of men, having the advantage of a complete surprise; but he felt, as by instinct, that his fist had just made acquaintance with a far more than usually tough customer, and he would have kept his guard until the job was made sure—only for that remarkably pretty face that lay so tempting near his lips!

Not that he ventured to "take toll," though the temptation did assail him, for the single instant during which those white lids veiled her eyes: to blush hotly as they opened, to gaze for another instant squarely into his own eyes.

Then—was it also instinct?

With a deft motion the young lady was out of his arms, though still touching him, and her musical voice was ringing out anew:

"On guard, sir! Look—he's pulling a gun!"

A bit of unconscious slang, pardonable in one whose life had been passed in a region where words are full of meaning, where life is far too short for red tape or circumlocution offices.

Victor understood the words like one to the manner born, and as he looked toward the fellow whom he had brought to his knees, he saw that the ruffian, half-stunned, was drawing a pistol from his pocket.

One swift sweep of his left arm sent the young woman a half dozen paces to one side, fairly out of harm's way, then he sprang forward, giving a kick that struck both pistol and hand, bruising one and sending the other whirling away through the darkness of night.

There was no time for more prudent action, for Victor knew right well how swiftly self-acting revolvers can be played in case of need; but, though the disarming was perfectly done, so far as the rascal himself was concerned, it had one inconvenient result—the weapon exploded when it struck the stony ground.

Victor did not wait for that. Hand followed foot with the swiftness of thought, and the dangerous knave was sent over backward, his limbs outflung and quivering like the legs of an ox before the hammer of the butcher.

A brief silence followed the shot, but then, from two different quarters, and coming from no very distant point, sharp yells arose, only too plainly telling that the alarm had been taken and would rapidly spread.

"Quick!" ejaculated the maiden, springing forward and catching an arm of her defender. "We must run—I wouldn't be caught here—this way—for worlds!"

"But the rascal brought it on himself!"

"Come, I say!" with a touch of impatience in her tones as other excited shouts came floating to their ears. "You don't know—he'd swear black was white—and if his evil gang should—do come!"

Such scruples as he might have melted away before the anxious, almost tender pleading of those last words, and with one hand touching her trim waist, Victor Baird turned and ran lightly away in the direction she indicated.

Curiously enough, perhaps, he never for an instant thought of danger or aught evil in connection with his strangely-met companion. One with that face, those eyes, could not be other than pure and innocent!

So he would have reasoned, had he taken time for so doing; but he did nothing of the sort. His hand simply slipped a bit further around that lithe waist, bringing the girl close to his side, his other hand by some magic finding both of hers in front, to lend her aid in running and assurance from falling.

Taking the direction from whence no cries had come, turning into another and seemingly still darker street, his fair guide pressed on with a lightness of foot and smoothness of motion which quickly excited the young man's admiration, almost as much as her fair face had done but a short space earlier.

"If you are tired—" he began, when their flight had continued for a couple of minutes.

"Tired? I could run all night if—but you?" stopping abruptly, tipping her pretty head to one side the better to glance up into his eyes.

"Forgive me—please? I didn't think—or, rather, I only thought of getting as far as possible from that ruffian, Peck!"

"Like you, miss, I could run until dawn, if necessary—with such a companion!" gallantly declared Victor, but regretting the words almost as soon as they had passed his lips.

For the fair stranger swiftly freed her hands,

slipping away from his arm, standing lightly poised on her feet like one ready for flight at the slightest movement on his part.

"How dare you?" she panted, her eyes fairly flashing through the gloom. "What do you take me for, anyway, sir?"

"A lady, in the best sense of the word," was his hasty reply.

Acting impulsively, as she did from the first, the young woman stepped closer, a little hand resting lightly on each one of his shoulders, gazing keenly, intently into his eyes.

Apparently she was satisfied with what she saw in them, for a full breath of contented relief parted her lips as she stepped back a pace, followed by the words:

"I'm both glad and sorry stranger: sorry that I fired up so quick, and glad that you are different from what I began to fear."

"May I ask what sort of beast that was, lady?" ventured Baird.

Before replying, the young woman cast a searching look around, listening for a bit to the indistinct sound of excited voices at or near the spot where the rescue had taken place. She saw naught to cause fresh alarm, and none of the men attracted by the shot seemed to be coming their way.

"I reckon none of them saw us, and Hardin Peck, will hardly have cheek enough left to tell the crowd how come he so," she said, with a little laugh, slipping her hand through the arm of her rescuer, moving away at a more leisurely pace.

"Meaning the fellow I had the pleasure of knocking down?"

"That same—yes," nodded his fair companion, but moving just a little closer to his side, like one who fears the object alluded to. "You did it up in style—if I hadn't been so terribly scared, I could have jumped for pure joy!"

"By which I judge you have no great liking for—what name did you call him?"

"Hardin Peck. A sport, gambler, and bit of everything that is wild and reckless! Ah! feeling through that light touch on his arm, an instinctive thrill of repulsion. "Now you're jumping to a wrong conclusion, sir! I know Hardin Peck—yes! But only as nearly every one in Loughorn knows him: by sight and reputation. It was purely through accident on my part that I met him this evening; I was detained at the house of a friend, and as brother Oscar failed to call for me, as he promised, I thought it no harm to run home alone. Then—Peck chanced along, and—tried to kiss me!"

"The villain!" indignantly ejaculated Victor.

"He's all that, and plenty more. He has the reputation of being chief of Loughorn, and—I hope you will not let it get out that you knocked him down, sir?"

"I'll not put it into the papers, but if he asks me, I'll hardly take the trouble to deny my knuckle-writing."

"Of course, sir, I wouldn't have you tell a lie about it, but," with a strange hesitation in her voice, usually so clear and decisive, "he really is a dangerous man. And—I'd hate mightily to have harm come to a gentleman like—like you, sir, for helping me!"

A sudden shyness seemed to come over her, and though Victor felt his heart grow still warmer toward this strangely impulsive creature, he was far too manly to think of pressing a seeming advantage.

She led him on with quickened steps, plainly anxious to gain her destination, and as the town of Loughorn covered no marvelous space of territory, the end came far sooner than Victor expected—or wished, if the whole truth must be told.

"I live here, sir," the young woman said, abruptly pausing at a little gate in a picket fence running in front of a plain frame house. "I have not thanked you for—"

"Please don't," interrupted the young man, with something like emotion in his usually calm tones. "If you think you owe me aught—"

"You saved me from his lips—if nothing worse," was the low interruption. "He was drunk—I'll do him that much justice. He never would have dared offer such an insult had he been sober, for he knows that Oscar has no particular love for him, even before this."

"Will you tell your brother of his conduct?"

"Of course—I tell Oscar everything," simply.

"Then, will you please tell him that my name is Victor Baird, and that I am stopping for the present at the Gilsey House, with my sister. I would greatly like to form his acquaintance."

"Why, surely, you never heard of Oscar before?" her big eyes opening wider, with undisguised wonder.

"No, but I've met—his sister!" risked Victor, quickly adding, lest she take fright as once before: "And I see no other hope of learning the name of the lady whom I have been fortunate enough to serve, to some slight extent, this night!"

A low, bubbling laugh greeted this rather labored sentence, and with an air of carelessness that was almost provoking, she said:

"I'm Mabel Finley, Oscar's sister. But you started to say something about a substitute for thanks, a bit ago, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—I'll do it! I wished to ask if I

might call on you, in proper form, at some future day?"

Mabel slipped through the little gate before answering. When she did speak, her tones held in them a touch of that almost prim reserve which he had noticed once before, and which only increased her charms in his estimation.

"You can ask Oscar that question, Mr. Baird. If he says yes, I'll not—well, I'll try to be at home! And now—good-night, sir!"

With a shy, dainty touch of the hand, she turned and ran up to the door, opening it and vanishing from his sight.

Victor turned away, without paying much heed to his steps, thinking solely of Mabel, when, turning a corner, two armed men leaped out upon him, the foremost striking viciously at his back with an ugly-looking knife.

CHAPTER IX.

A KNIFE IN THE DOOR.

THE recklessness with which he sent his horse plunging down the steep grade, over the rocky points where the footing was uncertain at the best, and a tumble would be an awkward affair, proved Jordan Harpe to be hardly his own master on that occasion.

It seemed almost as though he was trying to leave ugly doubts behind him, to blot out, if ever so briefly, all memory of that strange disappearance by creating a peril for himself.

One or two of the cowboys put a different interpretation of his haste, and with uneasy glances back in the direction of the deserted ranch, transforming each shifting shadow into a ghostly pursuer, they crowded on, fairly filling the narrow cut, and promising bruised flesh, if not broken bones, before that passage could be completed.

"Stiddy, dug-gun ye!" angrily cried out Martin Thompson, as his horse was crowded up against the rocks. "A body'd reckon all the ha'nts this side o'—"

"Ow-wow—wirroo!" howled Pat McQuery, in response to a savage tug at his brick-red hair, never for an instant doubting but that the bony claws of a spook had claimed him for its particular prey.

His terror seemed to be communicated to the horse he was riding, and the confusion grew more complete. It was a mad, reckless, thoughtless scramble through the ford and up the corresponding slope to gain the level of the prairie once more—a struggle that went far toward exhausting both man and beast, though, fortunately, nothing worse befell any of the company.

Thanks to the restless spirit which had urged him on, Jordan Harpe escaped that jam, and saw enough of the final struggle to at least in part drive away those ugly thoughts. Though it might easily have been tragic, there was a touch of comedy in that crazy rout.

"Of all the dug-gun— What was ye tryin' to git away from, anyhow?" viciously cried the Square Ring foreman, when once more on the level. "What bit ye all? Ef ever a man o' ye didn't hev a bal'-hornet's nest fer a saddle-pad, then I'm brandin' him a plum' crazy fool! An' I ain't chargin' a red fer heatin' of the iron, nuther!"

"Waal, the boss made a break, like—"

"Irish hollered spooks was—"

"An' Mart Thompson, he tuck 'n' skipped keenest o' all!" squeaked still another voice, coming from the crowd, but so adroitly disguised as to defy recognition, even by those who must have been closest to the audacious speaker.

It takes precious little to turn the scale when it is evenly balanced, and as these words conjured up a vision of the doughty foreman in hot flight from a gang of "ha'nts," Jordan Harpe burst out laughing. Like master, like man. The cowboys roared, and even Thompson himself gave a sardonic grin.

Although the twinkling stars afforded the only light, that was enough to let keen eyes distinguish faces and forms, and before the little company proceeded further, Jordan Harpe passed them in review.

"Jest our own lads, ef ye don't count the Irish," confirmed Mart Thompson. "Reckon the critter hes done lost hisself, boss?"

"What do you think of him, anyway, Thompson?"

"That he's plenty fresh 'nough to keep—ef somebody don't salt him down as too mighty fresh!" grimly chuckled the foreman.

The ranchman shifted uneasily in his saddle. Plainly enough this unexplained absence of the man who claimed the name of Kent Gladwin, was giving him no little uneasiness.

"I reckon he tuck it we didn't sift the ranch quite close 'nough, an' 'cluded he could make more runnin' the rifle him own self," the foreman added, after a brief silence. "I'll go fetch the critter—ef you'd rather hev him round-ed up, boss."

"If Why should I?" giving a visible start, like one disagreeably roused from dreaming. "Bah! if the fellow can't take care of himself, then he's come to the wrong latitude!"

Ending with a loud, harsh laugh, Jordan Harpe gave his horse loose rein, riding briskly

away from the ford toward the Square Ring Ranch.

"All broke up—jest clean broke up, the boss is!" ventured Martin Thompson by way of explanation to the cowboys. "Set a mighty store by the old man, he did! An' then—waal, I ain't sayin' I'd clinch the bargain, my own self, but Baird did offer a mighty pile o' dingbats fer the Squar' Ring an' its belongin's!"

As though instinctively divining that their boss would prefer his own thoughts to their company, the foreman and the cowboys kept a few yards to the rear, measuring their pace by that Jordan Harpe saw fit to set.

What his secret thoughts were, none may say, with certainty; but if his pale, stern, almost haggard visage bore true witness, then his musings were the exact reverse of agreeable.

How could it be otherwise?

He must have considered himself, in some degree at least, as responsible for the safety of his guest, the rich man to whom he had been on the point of selling the Square Ring Ranch at a figure which nearly all good judges would say was very liberal.

True, no money had passed between them as yet, but if Gregory Baird should never turn up after this inexplicable vanishment, would the public at large take his oath to that effect? Would they not demand of him a true and full accounting? And if—

There seemed the shadow of a knotted noose in the air, and with a sound that was half-curse, half-groan, Jordan Harpe clapped spurs to his good steed, dashing away over the prairie at a pace that slowly but surely distanced his followers.

He did not draw rein until almost at the door of the Square Ring, but when he did so, it was with a sharp ejaculation, his body shrinking back in the saddle, his black eyes staring almost wildly at an object showing near the center of the closed door.

The gleam of a star in reflection from a polished surface caught his attention first, and with this to guide them, his eyes were not long in making out the rest.

There was a knife planted in the wood, pinning something white to the door!

"Snatch it out—boys comin', boss!" hastily panted Thompson, dashing up and taking all in at a glance, just as Harpe flung himself out of the saddle.

Before this hint could be followed, if Harpe had any such intention, the door was pulled open and a dimly-visible figure showed in the frame.

"Hellow, boss! Hev chuck ready ag'inst you kin onsaddle. Bin holdin' of it back so's 'twouldn't git too clammy cold, an'—"

"Fetch a light—lively!" cried the ranchman, harshly, one hand thrusting the foreman back as though fearful he meant to pluck that ominous object from the wood before its full meaning could be read.

Warned by that unusual tone, the cook made all haste, bringing a candle, his curved palm the shade which kept the wind from extinguishing the light.

Jordan Harpe snatched the light away, thrusting it close enough to the panels for all to see that grim warning: for warning it certainly was.

A square of paper was pinned to the door by a knife: long and sharp of blade, its handle bound in polished brass. On that paper were a few words, boldly written. Below the words, in place of an ordinary signature, there was drawn the figure of some sort of animal, squatting on its haunches close beside a little mound, as of freshly-turned dirt.

"Who stuck up this notice, Dan?" harshly demanded the ranchman, his eyes glowing redly as they turned toward the gaping, wide-eyed cook.

Dan could only splutter forth his huge amazement, at first. He could give no satisfactory explanation. All he was sure of was that the knife had not been in the door less than half an hour before. He had left his cooking to take a look out for the coming of his boss, and he solemnly swore that the door was perfectly bare at that time.

No, he had heard no sound, had caught sight of no person moving about the ranch: cross his heart and strike him blind if he was telling the ghost of a lie or holding back a particle of truth!

"It's all right," grimly said Harpe, slipping the knife into his belt and the paper into his bosom. "It's a clumsy joke. When I find out who hatched it—and find out I will, sooner or later—we'll see who does the heft of the laughin'!"

Leaving his horse for others to care for, and nodding for the foreman to follow, Jordan Harpe entered the ranch.

Like the majority of "bachelor ranches," the Square Ring had been conducted on rather democratic principles up to the date of Gregory Baird's arrival. Until then there had been but one table for master and man, but as a man will who wishes to make a good impression on another, Jordan Harpe wrought a change, reserving the ranch proper for his guest, his foreman and himself. And now, thanks to this change for the better, as soon as Dan had dished

up the supper and been released from further duty, chief and lieutenant could talk freely, without fear of interruption or eavesdropping.

While this was being done, however, Jordan Harpe was not altogether idle. The discovery of that steel-pierced warning had caused him to briefly forget the unexplained disappearance of his guest, but he lost little further time in learning the truth: Gregory Baird had not returned to the ranch; Dan had not seen him since he left in company with the boss, early that morning.

Yielding this last frail hope, Harpe selected a couple of his most trustworthy cowboys, bidding them eat their supper in a hurry, then ride over to the Knob and set a fire going on its apex.

"Keep up a blaze, and watch for an answer. If one shows up, one of you hasten to see who kindled it. If Mr. Baird has lost his way, he'll be mighty apt to catch sight of and know what your light means."

With an indecision strange in a man of his strong, self-reliant nature, Harpe asked both foreman and cowboys if they could suggest any other move at all likely to be of use. No hints were supplied, and with a troubled frown on his brows, Jordan Harpe re-entered the ranch.

Neither chief nor lieutenant seemed anxious to break the silence which fell over them at table. Both ate freely, for perfectly healthy men are always ready for their food when meal-time comes around. But neither of them touched the bottle of whisky which, according to custom, Dan had placed near each cover.

Was it because they knew right well the value of words, and dreaded being led to speak too freely?

Silence could not last through the entire night, and pushing back his plate, forming room for an elbow as one hand curved around his temples as a support to his head, Harpe slowly asked, his black eyes fixed on Thompson's face from under that screen:

"Well, what do you make out of it, pardner?"

"Waal, I ain't so mighty sure I kin make much o' anything out o' it," came the slow, guarded reply. "Ef things was a bit dif'rent—ef the old gent had bin mounted, 'stead o' foot-back, that is—a body mought pritty nigh reckon he'd skipped out."

"Skipped? What do you mean by that, man?" sharply demanded Harpe, dropping his hand and gazing squarely into the bronzed face opposite. "What would make him skip, as you call it?"

"Skeered clean out—no less!" with a vigorous nod.

"You're crazy, man! What should scare him out?"

"Thar's the Ha'nted Ranch, fer one thing. The old gent hes tuck a powerful sight o' interest in axin' 'bout that same: ef one time, he's spoke to me over it a clean hunderd. An' the boys—waal, they've kept him stuffed fuller'n a tick, pritty nigh from the fust day he hit the ranch; jest *crammed* him with tha'r spook yarns!"

"I tell you he don't take any stock in haunts. He laughed at me when I spoke of them, to-day, and he wasn't lettin' on, either!"

"Waal, mebbe so. I'm only hopin' he'll turn up all right, fer—"

"For—what?" impatiently frowned Harpe as Thompson paused.

"Fer the sake o' my neck—an' yours, too, fer thet matter!"

CHAPTER X.

WHO IS GOPHER GABE?

JORDAN HARPE gave a start at that slow, meaning tone, his face flushing hotly, to turn pale an instant later as he rightly interpreted the meaning conveyed by that steady gaze.

"You think—curse ye, Thompson!" breaking forth in hot wrath, his clinched fist falling on the board between them, making the dishes clatter and the bottles dance unsteadily. "What is it you're driving at now?"

"Nothin' more'n what we-all hev got to look squar' in the face, boss," was the cool response. "I say it ag'in: I'm hopin' the old gent 'll turn up all safe and sound, or—"

"Say it, man!" growled Harpe, his black eyes flashing.

"Waal, I kin do that, boss. The old gent acted like he mought be a mighty rich man, an' folks mought reckon he hed too many dingbats fer the good o' his own health—ef he don't turn up, pritty quick!"

Jordan Harpe lowered his eyes, plucking nervously at his crisp beard after his habit when ill at ease.

That ugly thought could hardly have escaped him, during the interval since he had parted from Gregory Baird, yet its blunt presentation just now seemed to give him a benumbing shock.

"You don't believe—you can't think I had any hand in this ugly mystery, Thompson?" he spoke, at length.

"To be course I don't," was the instant response. "But 'tain't so much what I think, as what outsiders 'll be thinkin', ye mind, boss. It's them we've got to look out fer, unless the old gent turns up, soon."

"He will—he must! What could have happened him? What could have harmed him without my hearing the racket?"

"I ain't tryin' to say, boss," slowly uttered

the foreman, seemingly finding "the right words difficult to choose. "But—nuther did Dan hear the critter as stuck that knife in the door!"

"What? You don't reckon—"

"It's too mighty much of a mix fer to reckon much o' anythin'," with a short, forced laugh. "Es fer the knife biz, I didn't ketch a squar' look at that bit o' paper, but I'm willin' to bet odds it wasn't stuck up thar by any fri'nd o' yours—eh?"

Jordan Harpe hesitated for a brief space, then drew both knife and paper from their resting-places, dropping them on the table.

"Take a square look, then, and see what you make out of them!"

Thompson picked up the knife first, turning it over and over, keenly scrutinizing both blade and haft. Neither were marked, save with the customary brand of the maker. The weapon appeared to be perfectly new, and of a very common pattern.

"Mighty little show thar!" the foreman muttered, resigning the weapon with a frown. "I kin turn up anyway hafe a dozen jest like it 'mongst the boys: only not so nigh new."

But he had hardly touched the pierced square of paper before a sharp, excited ejaculation burst through his lips.

"Short, sharp and sweet, isn't it?" grimly laughed Harpe, leaning across the board to also look at the paper.

It might be said there was neither address nor signature, for the brief message began as follows:

"Last warning, Jordan Harpe! Hands off the Golden Pigeon! If but a single feather sticks to your fingers, 'twill be war to the knife!"

Below these words was a fairly executed pen drawing of an animal, resting on its hind feet and haunches, near a little mound of dirt.

"Looks something like a prairie-dog, don't you reckon, Martin?"

"More like a gopher—Gopher Gabe, or I'm a liar!" ejaculated the foreman, dropping the bit of paper as though it had suddenly turned hot enough to sear his fingers.

"And who's Gopher Gabe?" asked Harpe, though the hand that raised to stroke his black beard was trembling perceptibly.

"A devil on ten wheels! A bloodhound fer the pure love o' it! A critter that never gives tongue once he hits a trail, but who was never yit knowed to lose the scent or fail to ketch his game!"

"You mean—a detective?"

"One out o' ten thousan'—I jest *do*, boss!" emphatically, nodded Thompson, drawing a full breath, at the same time regaining much of the composure which that startling discovery had scattered.

"You may be in the right, pardner, though I can't help doubting it. For one thing, what can a detective have to do with me?"

"That's what *gits* me!"

"I have never stepped to the wrong side of the law, to my knowledge. No man living can throw dirt in my face or on my record; unless it might be from what happened this very day," his proud tone altering perceptibly.

"Tain't that; even sech a smart devil as Gopher Gabe couldn't 'a' hit it off so mighty sudden. But—anythin' new, boss?"

Jordan Harpe had picked up the square of paper, examining it more carefully, and it was because of a few muttered words passing his lips that Thompson broke off to ask that question.

"What did I say?" he asked, flushing hotly under that keen gaze.

"I wouldn't be clean sure, but it sounded like 'same hand,' or somethin' o' that sort, boss."

The ranchman hesitated for a few moments, his eyes wandering from face to paper, then back again, like one doubtful as to his course. But then, leaning a little further across the board, he slowly spoke:

"I can trust you, Thompson? Trust you fully, completely?"

"Tain't fer me to say that, boss, ef you cain't make up the mind o' ye," was the quiet response. "All I kin say is this: ef I kin help ye in any way, I'm ready an' waitin' fer the say-so."

"I've always found you pure white, pardner, and I've no one else I can consult with. So—the devil! I surely couldn't have lost it!"

While speaking, Harpe was fumbling in his pockets, without being able to discover the object sought for. His face turned paler then ever as he fairly realized the truth, but then he rallied again.

"I had something which I wished to compare with this writing, and ask your opinion on, but I must have lost it."

Thompson placed a finger beside the first two words on the paper, a silent query in his keen eyes. Harpe nodded assent.

"Yes, it was a warning, somewhat on the same order as that."

"With the pictur' of a gopher?"

"No. It was signed with the initials G. G."

"Gopher Gabe ag'in, by holy!" ejaculated Thompson, strongly excited.

"I reckon it *must* have been, but—I'll do it, old pard! I must confide in some one, and you seem to be my only friend, now!"

With that, Jordan Harpe spoke more openly of the other warning, and with an accuracy that betokened frequent readings and hard study, he repeated the lines which had so roused Gregory Baird's indignation a few hours before.

"I just happened across it, the other morning," he added, by way of explanation. "I went in to waken the old man, and caught sight of an envelope lying on the floor, as though flung in through the open window. The envelope was sealed, and directed to Baird, but—well, something told me it meant mischief, and—I carried it away with me."

The ranchman flushed hotly, stammering clumsily as he admitted so much, evidently feeling ashamed of his conduct. But Thompson silently nodded his approval, and Harpe went on with greater smoothness.

"You can guess why I kept the letter from him, for you must have at least a suspicion how tightly I am run for ready money. In fact, I'm in a mighty tight box, and my only hope lies in selling out. If I let Baird hitch on to that paper, it might make him shy, if not fly the track altogether. Not that I've anything to conceal as to that infernal ranch—you know that, Thompson?"

"Nobody but a fool or a crazy critter would think t'other way boss. An' nobody that wasn't a crook him own self would reckon you meant any more'n to save your own interests by holdin' back that fool' note. I call it 'jest clean smartness, I do!'"

"It's made me feel more like an egg-sucking cur than an honest man, ever since," frowned the ranchman, moodily. "It makes me feel almost like a murderer, now, since poor Baird has disappeared so strangely! Only for me—if he had opened that letter, he might have broken off the bargain, but he'd surely be safe and sound in life and limb!"

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no. Mebbe—slow up, boss!" sudden excitement breaking that placid surface once more. "Didn't you say thar was a name signed to that paper?"

"The initials 'G. G.'—nothing more."

"Which stan's fer Gopher Gabe, an' Gopher Gabe—Boss, ef *that* p'izen critter hes any sort o' interest into the old man, you kin bet the Squar' Ring an' all its b'longin's, that the old man ain't dead n'r crippled, nuther!"

"What! you surely can't mean that—Can Gopher Gabe have met Baird and frightened him off by talking?"

"Don't it take on a look that way, boss? Ef he sent sech a warnin' as that, it proves he hes hed a eye onto the old gent. I read them words to mean jest so; 'Don't bite at the Squar' Ring Ranch, or you'll be ketched as a sucker!' Ef he wanted so mighty bad to skeer Baird off, why wouldn't he make 'nother try, seein' the fust one failed?"

"If he has—I'll put a stop to his dirty tricks if I can ever lay eyes on him!" cried the ranchman, his eyes glittering angrily.

"Ef—ef—jest so," chuckled Thompson, back of his hand, evidently fearful of arousing the anger of his employer, yet unable to wholly restrain his sense of humor. "They *do* say, boss, that it's only them as don't *want* to see Gopher Gabe as ever *does* see him! He jest runs down his game, bags 'em, then leaves 'em fer others to hang. Yit—I say, boss, what-fer idee mought ye hev 'bout that critter Irish Pat run up this way?"

"Kent Gladwin, you mean?"

"Is that the name he claimed? Stranger, too, didn't he say—"

"Yes. I remember he said he had never been in these parts before."

"Y-a-a-s!" drawled the foreman, his lids almost closing. "Mighty quick at pickin' up the lay o' the kentry, don't you think? 'Peared to know a powerful sight 'bout the old ranch fer a plum' stranger, it seemed to me! Not that I mean to say—"

"What *do* you mean to say, then?" impatiently demanded Harpe.

"Course I couldn't make oath to it, but—mebbe he's the very critter we was talkin' over jest now."

"You mean—not Gopher Gabe, the detective?"

"Don't it savor that way, come to look at it all over ca'mly?"

Jordan Harpe sprung from his chair, striding back and forth the length of the room, his hands working convulsively, his eyes blazing, his face pale as that of one of the ghosts he had seemed to dread.

"If I could only think it!" he panted, his broad chest rising and falling with strong breaths. "If—if I ever meet up with the rascal, I'll make him read his title clear, or I'll—"

He stopped short, turning quickly, almost suspiciously toward Martin Thompson; but the foreman was pouring a fair-sized drink of whisky into his glass, the personification of unconcern.

"Hyar's lookin' your way, boss!" he said, with a nod, then tossing off the liquid poison like so much water, after which he rose to his feet. "Ef thar's anythin' more I kin do, Mr. Harpe, jest say so."

"Nothing, thanks. Go bunk in. If Baird

don't turn up before day there'll be hard work for all hands to-morrow. Best prepare for it."

"I'll be on deck when the horn blows, boss," nodded the foreman, then leaving the room and building.

For more than an hour longer Jordan Harpe paced the floor, giving himself up to troubled thoughts, but then he also left the room, making his way silently toward the stable where his saddle horses were kept.

He called no help, preparing and leading forth a fresh animal, apparently desirous of escaping notice. If so, he was disappointed, for Martin Thompson called out clearly:

"Anythin' I kin do to help, boss?"

"No. I'm going to see if the fire is kept burning at the Knob."

"Mebbe so," muttered Thompson, grimly. "But I'm bettin' you lie!"

CHAPTER XI.

ONE GOOD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER.

VICTOR BAIRD never knew whether he had caught that footfall, or whether a bit of sentiment had led him to half turn for a backward glance toward the spot where he had lost sight of Mabel Finley; but the fact remains, all the same, and to that involuntary motion he may almost be said to owe his life.

"Now I have got ye!" grated a vicious voice as that bared blade came down and out, seeking a living sheath; but, though its aim had been surely taken, that half-turn partly foiled its purpose.

Victor felt the cold steel tearing through the flesh and muscles of his back, then flinched a bit beneath the shock of a muscular wrist against the top of his shoulder. He had no time to think how badly he might be wounded, but with an instinctive longing for revenge, common to us all, he struck out heavily, for the third time that evening causing a strong man to stagger and reel.

"Down him, pard!" hoarsely snarled the would-be assassin, his unarmed hand alone preventing a clean knock-down by bracing itself against the ground. "Cut him into giblets!"

Despite the heavy shock which his own hand must have received when his murderous stroke was so unexpectedly foiled, the thug still gripped his knife, and quickly recovering, he gathered himself for a second and surer assault.

Victor felt something trickling down his back, and a vicious fire seemed licking at his shoulder. He knew that he was wounded. He felt that the hurt was severe if not mortal, and that belief filled him with a savage lust for vengeance. If that hurt meant death, he would not cross the dark river without company.

At such moments men think with marvelous rapidity, and all this flashed through Victor's brain in the brief interval lying between his stroke and those vicious words uttered by the man with the knife.

Until then, the young man had seen only the one shadowy figure. He now caught a glimpse of a second, and knowing that whatever he did must be done quickly, if at all, he sprung backward, at the same time jerking a revolver from his hip pocket and firing twice—straight at the man with the knife, checking his spring midway!

"Fire and—I've got it!" hoarsely gasped the fellow, flinging up his hands, dropping the blood-stained knife, drawing his athletic figure rigidly erect for a single instant.

Then, with the same terrible suddenness, his tense muscles gave way, and he sunk to the ground in a quivering heap!

At that same instant, a strange, sickening dizziness caught Victor, blotting out all else but that collapsing figure: that seemed to stand out clear and distinct as though the noonday sun shone down upon it in place of the feebly twinkling stars.

He caught indistinct sounds: heavy feet shifting, blows being dealt and the dull shock as of a falling body; but he saw nothing of what was taking place so close at hand during those half-dozen seconds while that deathlike dizziness lasted.

The mate of the man with the knife, cowed by the fall and that hoarse, gasping cry, turned to seek safety in flight, when he came fairly in contact with a muscular fellow who was running toward the scene.

A straight fist-shot sent the thug back, to hit the ground with his shoulders first, then the new-comer, jerking out a revolver as he sighted an upright figure just beyond a prostrate heap, cried out sharply:

"Steady, there! I've got you lined!"

These significant words seemed to scatter that lurid mist and break the benumbing spell which had fallen over the young man. He saw the speaker, not so indistinctly but that he could tell how thoroughly he had the advantage. Instead of cowering him, it made Victor hot.

"Shoot, but I'll lay you alongside your pard, here!" he said, thumb bringing back hammer with a sharp double click.

"Hold hard! You're not—are you Victor Baird? I'm Oscar Finley, and Mabel sent me—"

Precisely for what, Victor failed to learn,

just then. The sudden release from that unnatural strain proved almost too much. Only for the ready arm of the last comer, he would have sunk to the ground, in something more nearly akin to a swoon than he had ever known before.

"You are—hurt, by thunder!" exploded Finley, as his hand slipped across something wet and warm.

"It's nothing—just a scratch that—" mumbled Baird, rallying in a measure, vaguely conscious that his shots had awakened alarm in other quarters. "I can run—or walk, anyway!" he added glancing around, then feeling the blood rush hotly to his cheeks.

He was still something dazed, and that glance had been for Mabel Finley, doubtless suggested by what had happened only a short time before when like shouts of interest had broken forth upon the night.

Oscar Finley neither heard nor saw. He stooped over the fellow who had dropped to the shots of the young man, jerking back his head by a grip on the short hair, to fully expose his face.

"I knew it—Hardin Peck!" he grated, almost viciously.

"Slug him, pard!" grasped the wounded wretch, feebly stirring.

"Don't ye—Peck made me come!" spluttered that pard, just recovering sufficiently from his knock-down to scramble to his feet.

Finley leaped forward with dangerous energy, gripping an arm and twisting the frightened fellow around until his face was visible. It was rapidly swelling out of shape, the blood flowing freely from a gash cut by those iron knuckles; but one look was sufficient for those keen eyes.

"You, is it, Delaney? I might have know it! Hawk and buzzard, and I know which—"

The alarm had spread rapidly, and as only happens in a region where the value of pistol shooting at night is fully realized, a crowd was gathering, swarming from all quarters.

Their cries, their heavy trampling, perhaps, brought with them a vision of an uncomfortable noose, for, with a courage which he could hardly credit in himself, the stout-built thug tripped Finley, jerking his arm free, then darting away through the gloom.

"Steady, all!" came a clear, stern voice, from a leading figure as shadowy shapes drew nearer the spot. "What's the racket here?"

"That you, Dingley?" asked Finley, calling the city marshal by name.

"That's me. And you are— Hello, Finley!" "Who is it? Look at the critter? Who killed him?"

A chorus of similar exclamations broke from the increasing crowd as the prostrate figure of Hardin Peck was observed, and Oscar Finley fell back to the side of Victor Baird, hurriedly muttering a word of encouragement in his ear.

He saw probable trouble ahead, and began to regret that he had not hurried this young stranger away from the spot without losing time in proving who his assailants were. True, the thugs were plainly in the wrong, but despite that fact, despite the fact that one was a gambler and the other his toady, Finley knew that Peck had a strong and dangerous backing when it came to the test.

If he had been a bit slower in recalling this fact, it would have presented itself with the abrupt alteration in the tone and manner of Marshal Dingley when that official recognized the wounded man.

"Hardin Peck, by all that's— Did you plug him, Finley?"

"I shot the rascal, sir," quickly replied Victor Baird, giving his newly-found friend no time to speak.

"Is that so?" cried Dingley, striding forward and peering into his pale face, a heavy hand dropping on his shoulder. "And who might you be, young fellow?"

"My friend—don't be so careless with your dukes, Dingley!" an angry ring in his tones as he struck down the hand which, nearly touching his wound, made Victor flinch with pain. "Peck cut him first, and only got what he's been needing these three years. Peck and Jack Delaney double-banked him, and— What's that?"

"Who wants Jack Delaney?" called out a voice from beyond the main cordon.

"I do!" promptly answered Finley. "But he took leg-bail and—"

"And looked so mighty much like a skipper from pay, that I just froze tight to the critter—and took the chances of suit for scandal!" came the same voice, winding up with a light laugh.

"You've got him yet?"

"You'd reckon, if you could see him squirm! Steady, Jackey! The captain's waiting for you in the office; go settle your bills!"

The crowd parted, and Jack Delaney was thrust forward by his captor. Finley caught an arm and made him face the marshal.

"There's my signature on his fat mug, Dingley! Make him tell the straight truth, and you'll see Peck caught only half his dues!"

"He made me come—Peck did," mumbled the frightened wretch. "I didn't know he meant laying-out cold. He said slug—just common slugging, you know, marshal!"

"And he used knife before Baird shot, didn't he?" persisted Finley.

"I don't— Yes, he did!" flinching, shrinking from that menacing fist, the weight of which he had so recently tested.

"Peck is badly hurt—shot twice," said a middle-aged man, speaking to the marshal. "He may possibly pull through, with care, but I doubt it, seriously doubt it!"

There was a brief pause, during which Dingley glanced nervously from face to face, finally addressing Victor Baird with:

"I reckon I'll have to hold you, stranger, since you admit shooting Peck. If he dies—"

"Ah, let up, marshal!" frowned Finley, choking back his anger with a visible effort. "Delaney admits they begun the racket, and what more do you want? Can you hang a man for defending himself?"

"But—you know what a row Peck's—what strong interest this ugly affair will awaken. It will have to be investigated, and as this young gent is a stranger in town, he may skip—"

"I'll go his bail, and agree to have him on hand when wanted, sir," curtly interposed Finley, voice, eyes and face plainly showing that his temper was gaining the upper hand. "After what Delaney confessed, that ought to satisfy even a hog!"

"Do you mean to insinuate—"

"I insinuate nothing. I say it in just so many words. My friend has done nothing deserving arrest, and if you were ten times the city marshal, Fred Dingley, you couldn't take him to-night! He's hurt by Hardin Peck's knife. He's going with me to have that hurt looked after. And—he's going right now!"

With those final words, Oscar slipped his left arm about Victor's middle, moving slowly through the opening in the crowd which seemed instinctively made. His glittering eyes were on the marshal, his right hand on the butt of a revolver.

It showed more pluck than prudence, perhaps, but Oscar Finley was in a crowd which knew him well, and which could fully appreciate those qualities now uppermost. And pluck carried the point!

"Your word is good as a bond, Finley," said the marshal, making the best of a bad bargain. "If you go his bail—"

"I have gone it. Good-night! You know where to find me, if wanted, sir," was the crisp interposition.

Without further interference he conveyed Victor Baird clear of the crowd, his anger changing to solicitude as he noticed how heavy and uncertain were the steps of his newly-made friend.

"Shall I tote you, pard?" he asked, after a bit. "I'm afraid you're hurt worse than I counted on, first off!"

"No—take me to the Gilsey House," said Victor, rallying a bit.

Instead of obeying this request, now that he began to fear the worst, Finley turned toward his own home, partly carrying the wounded man at times, supporting him at others, asking no questions. And it was not until they reached the little gate at which Victor had parted with Mabel Finley, that the young man realized whether he was being taken.

"Oscar, what is it?" he heard, like one in a dream, as the front door opened at their approach.

CHAPTER XII.

MORE WOUNDS THAN ONE.

It almost seemed as though Mabel Finley was watching for, if not exactly expecting them, for the front door swung wide open before they reached the stone flag in front of it.

A bright light streamed forth, showing her trim, lithe figure as in a golden frame, and though her face was naturally cast into shade, Victor Baird instantly recognized the maid on whose account he had been involved in this dangerous affair.

He freed himself from that supporting arm, lifting a hand to tip the hat which had been left behind at the scene of war. Instead, his trembling fingers swept across his damp brow, and in place of the polite greeting he intended, he stammered forth:

"I don't—I believe I am—funny! I feel so—sleepy!"

And ended by sinking down on the threshold, far nearer to swooning outright than he had ever been before.

"Ob, Oscar! you let him be—they've killed him, poor fellow!" panted Mabel, sinking to her knees beside the young man, making as though she would lift his drooping head into her lap.

"Don't you be a goose, sis!" gruffly uttered Finley, pushing her back to give himself more freedom. "Where's mother? Get cloths—and hot water, can't you, girl?"

Mabel sprung up and back so suddenly that she almost upset an elderly lady, who had been attracted thither by the sound of excited voices, and for a few moments there was nothing accomplished beyond giving and receiving hasty explanations. Then, however, all calmed down, the more readily that Victor began to rally from the effects of the shock he had received.

Oscar helped him to a lounge in the sitting-

room. Mother and daughter procured cloths and warm water, and after Mabel had been satisfied that there was no immediate danger, she was sent out of the room and the hurt was looked to.

Victor protested, for his bodily powers were returning and his confused brain clearing up. He was not hurt so badly but that he really felt ashamed of causing all this trouble.

"I never acted so silly before, and I'm too deeply mortified to ever do so again!" he declared, flushing warmly as he cast an uneasy glance around—to draw a breath of partial relief as he failed to see aught of Mabel.

"That's all right, my dear fellow," soothingly said Oscar, showing no mean degree of skill or talent in caring for his wound. "It might have been worse, but, all the same, it's a cut that needs looking after. There's a bruise on your shoulder. Did either of those rascals hit you with a club?"

"No. I turned partly around just as he struck. His wrist made that bruise, I reckon."

"The p'izen scoundrel! He meant to send his blade and hilt, too, clean home! That turn saved your life, Baird; not the ghost of a doubt about that!"

"What do you think set them on? I never set foot in this town till this evening, and never met either of those fellows before."

"Before to-night, you mean," significantly spoke Finley, then adding quickly, as he caught the curious gaze of his mother, who had been quietly acting as his assistant: "I'll explain later. Just now you're my patient, and it's against my rules to let them ask questions."

As Oscar said, the hurt might easily have been worse. The blade had made a clean cut, or rather thrust, despite the manner in which a death-wound had been avoided. The very shock his wrist received in striking across Victor's shoulder, had helped Peck jerk forth the weapon without lacerating the flesh.

The shoulder-blade had not been injured, though the steel must almost have glanced along it. There was only a slit at the top, but a trifle wider than the blade which had been used, with a narrower opening at the bottom, where the point of the knife had pricked its way through the skin, thus afforded a perfect drainage. To sum up, as Finley cheerfully declared, the hurt could hardly have been better arranged if Peck had deliberately set about it with that very end in view.

"It was the loss of blood that turned you faint, dear fellow," he wound up, when the last strip of plaster was pressed in place and the whole neatly bandaged by the nimble fingers of Mrs. Finley.

Victor flushed anew at that allusion, for Mabel had been readmitted to the room shortly before, and he hastened to make his excuses.

"It wasn't that, though you're very kind for offering such a fair reason, Mr. Finley. The fact is—I may as well confess—it is an habitual weakness, constitutional, or hereditary for aught I know. I always have just such a spell of faintness after a fit of anger."

It was rather a clumsy explanation, but his hearers were far from critical, and unless both words and looks spoke falsely, brother and sister were quite willing to overlook and forgive a much more serious fault than that. As for Mrs. Finley, she was very kind, in a quiet, reserved way, but she evidently knew nothing as yet of Mabel's adventure with Hardin Peck.

Now that he had an opportunity to see her without hat, and in the clear, mellow lamplight, Victor was more than ever impressed with the arch, brilliant, yet purely maidenly beauty of the young lady whom he had saved from worse insult that evening. And he was already beginning to feel almost grateful toward the gambler, since it had been through his actions that her acquaintance had been formed.

He caught himself wondering what his sister would think of Mabel, and that reminding him how anxiously she would be looking for his return with news of their father, he started up, saying:

"I forgot—I really must hurry back to the hotel, or sister will—it would frighten her half to death should she chance to hear of this unfortunate affray before seeing me!"

His worry was genuine, as all could plainly see, for up to that very moment Victor had never once thought of such a thing happening.

Mabel hurriedly whispered a few words to her mother, and after a barely perceptible hesitation Mrs. Finley spoke to Victor:

"You surely ought not to move about so soon, after receiving such a bad injury. We would heartily welcome your sister, if you will consent; Oscar will escort her in safety."

"Please say yes, Mr. Baird!" almost coaxingly added Mabel, her dark eyes sparkling up into his appreciative orbs. "I would so like to know her, and—Hurry, Oscar, before he can say no!"

Finley laughed, and Victor felt obliged to decline the kind offer, giving as explanation a few facts concerning their mission, and adding that he had strong hopes his father had already made his appearance at the Gilsey House.

Mabel was disappointed, and plainly showed

as much, not a little to the gratification of the young man, on whose heart she had already made a serious impression. If he could only think as much, in her case!

The fancy made him hasten his leave-taking, for he was still sensible enough to know that any show of sentiment so early, would be worse than folly.

All bore him company to the door, Oscar supplying him with a hat to cover his head, but when Victor offered a hand in parting to the man who had so boldly plucked him out of an ugly predicament, Oscar declined it with a little laugh.

"Later, my dear fellow, but not now. I'm going to see you as far as your hotel, to guard against your still further decreasing the population of Longhorn!"

"Brother! how can you turn it into a jest?" reproachfully said Mabel, her rosy lips pouting, and something marvelously like a tear in her bright eyes.

"With a twist of my tongue, sis," laughed Finley, slipping his left hand through the arm of his new friend, leaving the right free to handle revolver in case of need.

For a few moments after clearing the yard, neither man spoke, but then Victor tried to express his gratitude for what the family, and Oscar in particular, had done for him; only to be cut short.

"You began it, my dear boy," with a low laugh which could not entirely hide his own emotion. "You chipped in to save a little girl—and a complete stranger—from the wickedest whelp in all the State! Of course I'd have settled with him, later, but—that couldn't have saved Mabel, you know."

"But I can't understand how you knew me so quick!"

"Because I was hunting for Peck, and recognized his voice, just before you plugged the cur. Mabel told me—I got home just after you left—and I knew he'd be on the watch for a chance to get even for the thumping you gave him. See?"

All was made sufficiently clear by this hasty explanation, and as they kept on toward the hotel, Victor explained how he chanced to be out walking in strange quarters.

Victor braced up as he reached the hotel, and as his coat was of dark goods, while Mrs. Finley had stitched up the slit made by Hardin Peck's knife, there was nothing about his person to attract unwelcome attention when he asked the landlord if Gregory Baird had arrived.

The negative answer which he received, brought an uneasy frown to his face, noting which, Oscar Finley drew him a little apart, asking in low tones if there was aught he could do, to be of service.

Before Victor could answer, a light footfall sounded in the bare hall leading to the "parlor," and Flora Baird showed at the door.

"Father—have you found him, Victor?" she asked, her anxious gaze flashing swiftly about the dirty office.

"Not yet, dear," then hastily addressing Finley: "Please come to the parlor with us. Maybe you can suggest something."

Finley willingly complied, for the brief glimpse he had gained of that fair face, affected him powerfully. He felt that he had at last gazed upon the woman who, could he but win her for a bride, would make this earth a perfect paradise!

All of which goes to show that knives do not always sink deepest, and that more wounds than one were received on this eventful evening.

Oscar Finley went through with the introduction which followed, and the hurried but hearty credit which Victor bestowed upon his part of that night's adventures, with far more ease and coolness than that impressive young gentleman had exhibited; but he cut Flora's thanks as short as possible, deftly changing the subject by asking about their father.

He listened gravely while Victor explained, but if he suspected any evil-doing, any double-dealing to which Gregory Baird might have fallen victim, he showed nothing of it in his face or words.

It was far too early for them to grow anxious over his non-arrival, for a score of trifles might have hindered his coming: for one thing, he might have miscalculated the date of their reaching Longhorn.

"This isn't the East, remember, where all trains run on time to the very minute," he added, cheerfully. "He may yet arrive this night, for it's a long road from here to Square Ring Ranch."

"You know the place, then? What sort of man is the owner?"

"Jordan Harpe? I don't think you need borrow trouble on that score. He is quite up to the average of his class; he may be a little wild, drinking and gambling a bit at odd spells, but I've never heard anything actually to his discredit."

Oscar talked on, and chose his words so well that ere long he had succeeded in greatly soothing the anxieties of both brother and sister, for they could hardly doubt his friendliness after what had happened. And both were profuse with their thanks when he declared his readiness to ride over to the Square Ring on the

morrow, if Gregory Baird failed to make his appearance before then.

It was only a few moments after this offer was made, that the trio, now on the friendliest of terms, heard heavy footsteps enter the office. Almost involuntarily they listened, to hear a stern voice ask the landlord if one Victor Baird was in the house just then.

A few moments later, Marshal Dingley appeared in the doorway.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD SNAGS DROPS A CAUTION.

SILENT JACKSON sprang to his feet at the first note of that warning cry, losing all semblance of laziness, now the perfect type of an evil man who knows right well he carries his life in the hollow of his hand.

He merely cast a glance in this direction, then, as though recognizing one with authority to command, or else recognizing the importance of instant action, the gaunt ruffian flung himself bodily upon Gregory Baird, even as that worthy was gathering up his legs, making ready for a fight, the best that lay in his power.

"Ketch his boots!" grated Silent Jackson, his bony fingers deftly closing about the prisoner's throat. "I'll shet his wind, an'—"

"Not too durned much—jest enough!" interposed the new-comer, promptly playing his part, yet not so fully occupied that he could not take notice of what his comrade did.

Gregory Baird made the best fight possible under the circumstances, but that availed him nothing. On even terms, he might well have made it interesting for either of his assailants, but with two to one against him, and he already handicapped by age, weight and the inevitable relaxation of muscles which will overtake a man raised to hard, out-door exercise, when he changes to brain-work instead, the end could come but in one way.

Without permitting him to utter a cry which might possibly bring aid, or make a sound louder than his gasping breaths, Silent Jackson and his mates succeeded in gagging and binding the captive.

As the two fellows drew back, gazing down at their work, their quickened breath showed plainly enough that their victory had not been won without actual difficulty.

"Bites wuss then a hydrophoby skunk!" snarled Silent Jackson, shaking a few drops of blood from one hand, then sucking at the wound as though he actually did fear being poisoned.

"An' lays clean over any mule I ever shuck paws with, fer nasty kickin', right from the shoulder!" contributed the fellow who had brought that hurried warning, hopping unsteadily on one foot while he briefly nursed his other ankle with both hands.

Drawn by the sound of that brief struggle, or else by the warning which had been flung at Silent Jackson, the masked men had returned to the rock-chamber, and now made their presence known through a spokesman:

"What's gone crooked, Old Snags? Who's comin', an' what fer?"

Dropping his foot and bruised ankle, the shock-headed fellow was recalled to a sense of the impending peril, quickly uttering in his peculiar tones:

"I ain't so dead sure *who*, but they're lookin' fer a critter o' his bigness!" with a short nod in the direction of Gregory Baird. "I kin pritty nigh swar it's the Squar' Ring gang, an' ef they don't scorch the rats up yender, 'twon't be because they ain't hot 'nough!"

"Ef that's all, it mought easy be wuss," said Silent Jackson, with a wave of his hand which seemed to be accepted as a potent signal by the hooded knaves. Keep ready fer biz, in course, but don't let out a squeak afore ye jest *her* to—understand?"

"Then—the boss isn't gwine to show up?" ventured one of the party, hesitating in his retreat.

"Bite it off, S. J.!" hissed the one addressed as Old Snags, then speaking to the mask: "The boss'll come back ef he takes a notion, an' you'll see him ef ye do. Chaw on that, an'—git thar, Eli!"

The mask followed his fellows without venturing retort or reply, his mute submission going far to prove that both Silent Jackson and Old Snags were at least one grade above the rank and file.

"Cain't ye see how mighty keen yen' critter is strainin' the two ears an' eyes o' him?" hissed the man with the peculiar voice, gripping Jackson by an arm and jerking his shock-head toward Gregory Baird. "Slump over this way a bit, an'—"

The prisoner could no longer distinguish words, though that shrill, yet subdued hissing sound still came to his strained ears.

"Waal, what ye kickin' up sech a row 'long of, anyhow?" irritably demanded Jackson, pausing just without that circle of light, evidently beginning to feel ashamed at having taken alarm so readily.

"They's a bull gang makin' fer the ole shell up yen. an'—"

"Nothin' wuss then Jerd. Harpe an' some o' the Squar' Ring boys, I don't reckon, is it?"

"Ain't that heap-a-plenty?"

"Better'n ef 'twas wuss, though," chuckled Silent Jackson, renewing his quid. "It's all in the day's work, Snaggy, an' ye'd ought to knowed it 'bout me wastin' breath a-tellin' of ye. We was to round up the old gent, easiest way, an'—"

"I reckoned that was him, fu'st off," shooting a quick glance toward the dimly-visible form of the prisoner. "I didn't dast git nigh 'nough to jest make out what-all the racket was kicked up over, but when I see Jerd. Harpe, an' him comin' this way, tail-on-end, I easy reckoned that was what hed bu'sted loose."

"Y-a-a-s," drawled Jackson, his gaunt face twisted out of shape by a half-leer, half-grin. "Bound to kick up a mighty row, he was, ef only to keep folks from lookin' too mighty keen his own way! See, pard?"

As has been intimated, Silent Jackson was hardly what would be considered a model of masculine grace or beauty; but his present companion was even less comely for the eye to gaze upon.

His figure would have passed inspection well enough, its main fault being a rather awkward stoop of the shoulders, and a peculiar yielding at the knee-joints while in motion.

His age might have been placed at any figure between forty-five and sixty years, for his hair and beard, both bristling in every direction, "like quills on fretful porcupine," was of that nondescript "foxy" color which is so slow to betray the touch of old age.

Through this bristling, scraggly hair showed what time and hard usage had left of his teeth—half a dozen huge, yellowish-black tusches, so long as to keep his lips constantly parted, and so shaped as to lend his voice a strange, hissing, sputtering sound, which could hardly be mistaken after once being heard.

He wore no hood, possibly feeling that any attempt to disguise so long as he owned such a remarkable voice, would be labor spent in vain.

Silent Jackson wore a malicious triumph in his face, just as it had echoed in his voice when he gave vent to that speech. It was plain to be seen that he fancied he had made an important discovery, but if he expected to startle Old Snags by placing that hint in his way, he hardly made a success of it.

"Shell I tell ye what it is I do see, Jack-ass? Fer 'son' don't begin to fit onto the likes o' you!" sneeringly hissed the man with the shaggy pate.

"Go easy, critter!" scowled the silent one.

"Go easy you, man! Shake them fool ideas out o' your cabeza, or pack 'em down so mighty tight the boss won't never hear 'em rattlin'. He ain't him—ef ye reckon, go ax. But—pick out your boneyard afore ye start, fer they won't be no time a'ter!"

"Ef he ain't the boss, what fer'd the boss kick?" growled Jackson, doggedly. "Don't he play all through like he wanted to keep onbe-known to everybody?"

"Which is why I drap the warnin', pard," sibilated Old Snags, with an emphatic nod.

"Which is why you don't want to let the boss—the raal, sure 'nough boss, mind ye!—git even the ghost of a idee that you're so tired o' breathin' that you can't find nothin' better to keep ye goin' then tryin' to smell out what ain't 'lowed fer the likes o' ye to know. See?"

Silent Jackson made no response to this glib speech, contenting himself with a sulky shake of the head which might mean contempt, defiance or surly admission.

He slouched off through the darkness, followed closely by Old Snags, both of them too familiar with each crook and turn of that curious retreat to feel the lack of illumination for their footsteps.

Ere long they reached the point where the rest of the gang was waiting for what might turn up, and though they were now near enough to catch the muffled echoes of heavy feet, coming apparently from far up above their heads, the two partners pressed on a little further, as though desirous of keeping privacy sufficient for easy conversation.

"Didn't I tell yer?" hissed Old Snags, clicking his tusches together with an ugly sound.

"I 'lowed they'd come, a'ter the old cuss was missed, but—"

Silent Jackson hesitated, longing for a bit of light that he might read the truth in that ugly face beside him.

Right or wrong, he had come to the conclusion that Jordan Harpe was really the chief under whose orders he, like the rest, obediently worked. He had never been able to catch even a glimpse of that chief's face, long as he had served under him. Never for an instant had that chief laid aside his cunning disguise, timing his coming and going so carefully that he, Jackson, had never sighted him in other place than the Haunted Ranch or the recesses beneath.

He could not even swear that the voice in which the chief gave his orders was similar to that of Jordan Harpe. Still, he had won the impression that such was the case, and something about the manner in which that abduction of Gregory Baird had been planned and carried out, rendered his belief almost a certainty.

Up to the moment when Old Snags dropped that caution.

If any member of the gang knew who their chief really was, Old Snags surely was that personage, for he alone seemed entirely in the confidence of their leader. But—if he knew, would he admit it?

A hissing chuckle close to his ear told Silent Jackson that break in his speech was rightly interpreted, and he coaxingly muttered:

"Oh, come, pard! You know: ain't it jest the way I reckoned? Ain't Jerd. Harpe the real boss?"

"No, he ain't," positively declared his mate.

"Cross my heart, an' hope to die ef he is!"

Curiously enough, this positive assertion only strengthened Jackson's belief that he had solved the mystery aright, though he was far too shrewd to openly make that admission.

For a brief space they listened to what was going on above their heads, trying to read all aright with their ears, since eyesight was of no avail in that utter darkness.

Presently there came a faint rustling sound on their own level, and Old Snags turned toward that quarter with a subdued snarl of warning, adding in guarded tones:

"Who be ye, critter?"

"Jest me—Dick Roper."

"What's bitin' of ye, Dick Roper?"

"Thar—his'en!" as the thumping sound increased above their heads, sounding almost as though the floor of the deserted ranch was being torn up by the searchers. "They'll be comin' clean through ef— I say, Old Snags! ain't it twigty igh time we was settin' the spooks to work?"

"I ain't called fer 'em yit, hev I?"

"No, but—dug-gun it all, pard!" with a touch of anger in his muffled tones. "Let a critter know what's doin', cain't ye? Who's up thar, kickin' up sech a nasty row?"

"Waal, nigh as I could make out, pressed fer time es I was, jest then, thar was Jerd. Harpe an—"

"The Squar' Ring boss?" with an echo of evident relief in his tones. "Waal, ef he's thar, I don't reckon they's sech a mighty rush 'bout the spooks, a'ter all!"

"Which is to say—why so, Dick Roper?"

"Why—you know! Ain't he— Oh, come, pard," wheedlingly, "ain't we all in the same box? An' don't you know who the boss raally is?"

"I know that ef the boss wanted to let us know who the boss is, the boss'd tell us who the boss was. That's what I know. Ef you know more, Dick Roper, you're in a mighty bad way!"

CHAPTER XIV.

PLAYING A LONE HAND.

ALTHOUGH the stranger who had given the name of Kent Gladwin, did his part toward searching the Uncanny Ranch, and at the same time kept pretty close watch over those who were assisting in that search, he was far from being content with what was done.

It might have troubled him to explain just why this should be so, for the search seemed thorough enough, despite the utter lack of success. With a pretty decided notion that, in some manner, the strange disappearance of Gregory Baird was connected with this dilapidated structure, he had looked particularly for hidden traps, secret recesses, and the like. Because none such was discovered (the only trap found being a simple door in the flooring, leading into a low, empty cellar with earthen walls), did not seem to him proof positive that none such had existence.

For reasons which will presently be made clear, Kent Gladwin was very desirous of meeting Gregory Baird, safe and sound, and so far from feeling discouraged with the rest of the search party, the handsome sport mentally resolved to solve the mystery, if human wits and human nerve could bring about that solution.

It was with this determination that, detecting signs of lagging energy, and expecting what shortly after followed, Kent Gladwin quietly stole out of the building and made his way over to where he had left his horse, a bit apart from the others.

"There you are, Patrick o' the fiery locks!" he muttered softly as he caught sight of the Irishman who had acted as his guide for the occasion, timorously keeping at a respectful distance from the Haunted Ranch, doubtless wide-eyed with expectation of beholding the entire company of hair brains being carried away by the ghosts. "If you happen to sight me, please put me down as the ghostliest of spooks, and close those watery moons of thine until I'm non est!"

Luckily for his hopes, the spot where his horse stood was in deep gloom, and as he silently led the well-trained animal away from the ranch, McQuery failed to detect the movement.

Gladwin quickened his pace as he drew further away from the ranch, casting frequent glances over a shoulder, for he expected to see the search party leave the building with each passing moment.

"If they sight me, some one will be just fool enough to yelp, and as I don't mean to respond, that fashion, it may come to a chase. Wonder

if that black-a-vised Harpe wouldn't call that sure proof of guilt on my part?"

Gladwin gave a short, soft laugh at the idea, though none knew better than he what serious consequences might follow such a charge, under such circumstances.

Luckily for him, perhaps, nothing of the sort took place, as the reader is well aware. Although the retreat of the foiled searchers was not delayed much longer, there was ample time for Kent Gladwin to put his horse in hiding, and to creep back to fair eye-shot of the Haunted Ranch.

He listened for something to be said about his absence, but that vacancy was not discovered until the tumble-down building was left far behind the cowboys from the Square Ring.

"Count me your grateful debtor, gentlemen!" softly laughed Gladwin as he saw the horsemen fade away in the gloom. "You couldn't have bagged me, anyway, but you might have upset my ideas by yelping out, thus putting all the spooks up to snuff; and to the fact that there was at least an audience of one lingering in the neighborhood!"

Kent Gladwin made no move toward leaving his place of hiding under a scrubby clump of bushes, surrounded by tufts of half-dry grass. He simply moved enough to draw forth a brace of revolvers and examine them, one after the other, making sure the weapons were in good working order.

"Jordan Harpe would be mighty apt to think me a fool for even thinking of powder and lead in connection with spooks," he muttered to himself in half-amused tones, as he replaced the tools, handy to his grip in case of need. "And yet—am I so mighty sure of that? Is he so terribly frightened of haunts? Or is he—well, time will tell!"

Although his words ceased there, so far as audible expression went, Kent Gladwin kept up a pretty steady thinking while keenly watching the Haunted Ranch and its immediate vicinity.

Bit by bit he went over what had taken place up to the present moment, trying to judge Jordan Harpe without prejudice or favor, starting with his first fair look at his haggard, troubled face when the black smoke and the repeated sound of pistol-shots led him to change the course he had been following, to reach the spring where Gregory Baird had been lost track of.

Going over it all in regular order, Gladwin could not help believing that his suspicions were well founded; that, if he had not taken an active part in that vanishment, Jordan Harpe knew how it had been worked, and whither the victim of the outrage had been conveyed.

"Granting so much," his thoughts ran on; "why was he so reluctant to pay the ranch a visit, when I suggested it? Because of its uncanny reputation? Does that seem reasonable, in this matter-of-fact age? Can a man of his mental caliber—and if he's a fool or a weakling, then I'll never try to judge another man!—actually believe in spooks and haunts, of that sort? Hardly!"

"Why, then, did he have to be actually driven to the rack? Because a stranger was along, with eyes to see, ears to hear, and wits to understand? Because he feared having his precious plot split wide open?"

"I believe it! I really do! And if any one man can get at the bottom of this trickery, Jordan Harpe, he's in the harness right now!"

Possibly Mr. Gladwin would have chosen less boastful words had he been speaking his thoughts aloud, to an audience made up of others than himself; but as he felt full confidence in his ability to make his mental boast good, he may not be quite past forgiveness. At all events, he was ready to back up his resolution with his very life if needs be.

Although he felt almost positive that the secret of Gregory Baird's disappearance lay in or near the Uncanny Ranch, Gladwin showed no intention of entering the building, at least for the present. He felt that he was not wasting his time altogether. If the kidnappers were hidden anywhere in that vicinity, they surely ought to show some curiosity concerning the search party, if only to make sure it had really left the premises.

Far sooner than he had dared hope for, Kent Gladwin was rewarded for his patience by catching sight of a silently flitting shape—it could hardly be called figure, so dim and phantom-like did it seem, coming through the night—not far from the rear of the ranch, which it seemed to be encircling, as though to make sure the enemy had indeed departed.

With almost breathless interest Gladwin watched this shape, now passing in front of his covert, and sufficiently near to be distinguished as an armed man. When almost directly opposite, the man paused, mumbling a few words which the sport vainly strove to catch.

The fellow was evidently speaking to himself, for he was alone, and the keenest glances around failed to sight anything else that bore a human shape.

It was a temptation hard to resist, and many another in his place who so ardently desired to solve that annoying mystery, would have risked all on a swift leap forward to capture that unsuspecting man; but Gladwin held him-

self in check, hoping for something still better to come.

This appearance was little short of proof positive that Gregory Baird was held in captivity not far from the Uncanny Ranch, and hoping to be led to his prison by this knave, Gladwin silently awaited the proper moment for action.

After a brief pause the shadow moved on, taking a course which, if persisted in, would soon carry him out of range of that patch of bushes, and fearing to lose all should he remain inactive, the sport crept out from cover and began dogging his game.

This was ticklish work, at best, for he had no means of knowing how many other enemies might be lurking close at hand, to espy his movements, just as he had discovered those of the person at whose heels he now scouted.

With revolver firmly gripped in his right hand, using the other to aid in making his way as he crouched low down, Gladwin followed his game at as safe a distance as he dared risk, waiting for the discovery which he now felt confident could not be much longer delayed.

By a roundabout course, the shadow was leading him back nearer the ranch, and as he caught sight of a second shape near the building, Kent paused, crouching low as a subdued whistle came quavering through the night.

It was promptly answered by the other shadow, then came the call:

"How goes it, pard?"

"All hunky! The critters hes giv' it up as a bad job, an' pulled out. How thar? Got the old gent safe?"

"Slick as a whistle! Tried to kick a bit when we hauled him up, but that didn't do no hurt."

"Mebbe he got mixed, an' tuck it the rope was 'round the blessed thrapple o' him!" laughed the nearest shadow, moving toward the ranch. "Hangin' an' kickin' runs in double-harness, ye know."

They both laughed, coarsely, at the clumsy jest. Gladwin chuckled, too, below his breath, as he lay there under fair cover, for their manner plainly showed him they had no suspicion of being under the keen eyes of an armed foe-man.

The night was so still, and the distance intervening so slight, that he experienced little difficulty in catching each word let drop by the two knaves, even when they drew nearer to each other. As they seemed unsuspicious of eavesdroppers, they spoke in natural tones.

"Reckon we'd best pull out, then, pard?"

"Why not? The gang is gone fer keeps; I sighted 'em on furdur side o' the crick, headin' fer the Squar' Ring."

"Clean fooled, then, you reckon?"

"Sure! Anyways fer the night. Mebbe they'll come ag'in when they's daylight fer to pick up a trail, but we'll hev ther bull night in to git a start. Let 'em ketch us then, who kin!"

"All right: I'm ready. I say, pard!" turning his face toward the ranch and lifting his voice a bit.

"Say it, then, dug-gun ye!" came the coarse response from inside.

"Come help fetch up the critters. We're gwine to pull out!"

"Fetch, you! I can't leave the ole cuss all alone, kin I?"

"Oh, come off! Ain't he tied an' gagged? I ain't gwine to make two no trips, an' I'd hev to ef—you know how dug-gun skittish Nancy is, let 'one the black hoss."

"I know how dug-gun lazy you be, anyhow!" growled the, as yet, unseen rascal, adding after a brief pause: "All right, ef I must. Wait ontel I kin make sure he's tied all right."

The two outlaws moved toward the ranch, through the partly open door of which now shone a faint light. They did not enter, and very shortly after, a third shape crossed the threshold, the trio moving off past the scanty patch of grass where Kent Gladwin lay closely hugging the ground, talking about the cowboys the while.

They did not discover the bold sport, and when, by twisting his head around without moving his body, Gladwin saw them keep straight on, finally vanish in the gloom, he drew a long breath of intense relief.

"Is it a trap, or were they in good faith?" he asked himself, as he stole silently toward the ranch. "I'd like a little more time to make dead sure, but—the old gentleman has got to come out o' that!"

The light had been left burning by the outlaws, as a dim streak showing at the nearly closed door proved; and gaining the threshold, Gladwin pushed the door open part way, to almost immediately note a prostrate figure lying at the far end of the room.

Seeing nothing to alarm him, after a close look, he entered, bending over that bound form—to fall like a log under a crushing blow!

Then several dark shapes fell viciously upon the entrapped sport.

Gladwin, ten sinewy fingers gripping him like so many claws of steel, while the peculiar voice of Old Snags hissed sharply:

"Nail 'im, pards! Rope an' tie—don't stick nurstab, fer I'm jest—"

Crushed down by that cowardly blow from behind, pinned by those sinewy arms in front, with half a dozen other hands striving to close upon him: odds sufficient to subdue the toughest of men!

Yet, despite all this, for a few minutes Kent Gladwin maintained an almost superhuman battle, and more than once actually seemed on the point of breaking away from his panting enemies, to meet them on something more like equal footing.

His wonderful strength, his dauntless pluck, that marvelous endurance, all went to prove the wisdom of their elaborate preparations for the discomfiture of this spy, at which more than one of the gang had given a sneer of contempt.

But as man is only mortal, Gladwin at length reached the limit of his powers, and in a short time longer was lying helplessly on the floor of the Haunted Ranch, the center of a panting, puffing, hot and angered, yet admiring knaves.

"Who said he could rope an' tie the maverick his own lonesome self?" hissing panted Old Snags, gingerly feeling of himself like one who is by no means sure he has come off without losing some important members. "Who said I was a dug-gun ole granny fer—"

"Shet!" croaked Silent Jackson, in hasty warning, pushing the scornful veteran aside, where his physical peculiarities would not be so readily noted. "The critter ain't blind, n'r fit—"

"Shet, you!" retorted Old Snags, with characteristic recklessness. "The critter 'll never tell what he sees, fer—"

"Stiddy, I tell ye!" and Silent Jackson clapped a bony hand over those lips, rendered so prominent by the ugly tushes. "Mind the rules, ef ye don't keer fer nothin' else!"

Old Snags growled a bit, but his excitement was gradually subsiding, now that the fierce struggle was over, and it was his caution that extinguished the light which had played an important part in luring the sport so surely into their cunningly baited snare.

Old Snags and Silent Jackson stole out at the door, peering keenly around to make sure that the sounds of that fierce struggle had not attracted other dangerous customers; but their precautions were only a waste of time, for none such were nigh.

Neither of the rascals really expected different, for while planning, setting, and springing their trap, they had become tolerably well assured that they had but the one spy to deal with.

"An' that one was heap plenty, too, I'm tellin' ye!" grimly chuckled the man of silence, unable even while on scouting duty to keep his tongue from wagging. "I kind o' reckoned ye was pilin' it on a weenty bit too thick, pardner, when ye sot the trap, but—Waal, ef thar'd 'a' bin jest one more o' the same breed an' caliber, a hull dug-gun rijimint wouldn't 'a' bin none too big a gang fer gittin' thar on top!"

Old Snags gave one of his wordless hisses, by use of which he knew how to convey hint, warning or moral, almost as clearly as by the more ordinary vehicle of speech itself.

This particular sound bade Silent Jackson not forget that while the woods might be uncomfortably crowded with handsomer people than Old Snags, a census of the lot couldn't scare up one more entirely up to snuff than the gentleman who wore his boots.

"I knowed what I knowed, pard, an' ef you'll wait ontel you're a bit older, mebbe thar's other wrinkles you kin larn from yer uncle," he added, his tones sounding more snake-like than ever because of his sinuous movements through the gloom.

"Waal, I don't reckon they's much use huntin' furdur; do you?"

"Don't reckon."

Satisfied that no further trouble was to feared from outsiders, for the present, the two men returned to the ranch, where their mates were keeping guard over the captive sport, in the darkness.

Old Snags, seemingly as a matter of course, at once resumed command.

"Ketch holt, some o' you critters, an' we'll tote him over yen' way, an' git the job clean jobbed," he said, taking no trouble to alter or muffle his peculiar tones.

"Not—all that fur?" hastily expostulated one of the men.

"Jest that fur; why fer not?"

"What's the use, when they's sech a easier way?"

"Pu'st, bein' so I say so. Twice, bein' so rules a rule, an' as you're here to 'bey them rules, s'm I say fer to see them rules is ketch out jest as they need," explained Old Snags with an air of pithiness. "Mebbe you'd like to pint out jest whar I'm in the wrong, mister?"

"Tuck light!" warningly remarked Silent Jackson, in a voice whom his own mother would never have recognized. "No more, pard! Look at them two eyes o' his! Them's can't bein' to tell 'em fer shure!"

There was good foundation for this warning. Kent Gladwin was sufficiently recovered from his terrific struggle to think of renewing it at the earliest possible moment, and to avail himself of aught that could assist him when that moment arrived.

He was bound, hand and foot, with a thoroughness that spoke volumes for the respect his physical prowess had inspired. A nasty gag was crammed between his jaws. But his ears and eyes were left at liberty, and while treasuring up every word dropped by the enemy, he strained his eyes to make out face or figure, the intensity of his efforts lending a cat-like luster to those organs.

"Muffle the critter ef a squint frights ye," scoffed Old Snags, by way of answer to that warning. "Wrop his cabeza up in the blanket I stuffed my middle out with, to come nigher the old gent's bigness; but git a move onto ye! I'm mighty nigh run out o' waste time, I be!"

Silent Jackson gave a snort of intense disgust when that blunt allusion to Gregory Baird passed the tushes of his comrade. Such utter recklessness of talk from one who ought to know better, fairly set his teeth on edge.

"Not nigh sech a fool' tongue as you reckon, pardner," hissed Old Snags, who seemed to take note of all things, though he might pass them by for the moment. "What that critter drinks in at the ears o' him, won't never come out over his tongue."

"You reckon the boss—"

"I reckon it's heap time we was gittin' out o' this!" gruffly interjected Old Snags, turning to his other mates. "Ketch holt—you!"

Without much care for his comfort, Kent Gladwin was lifted from the floor by the masked knaves, carried through the front door, then across the level, close by the clump of bushes under which he had first stationed himself when beginning the espial which had ended so disastrously to his high hopes.

If he had been granted the free use of his eyes, the sport might have given a tolerably accurate guess as to the manner in which his presence near the Haunted Ranch had been discovered, for his bearers passed close by the spot where he had hidden his horse; indeed, they rudely dumped him on the hard ground only a few yards from that point.

In fact, it had been through his care for this animal that Gladwin had come to grief.

Silent Jackson had made the discovery, of owner as well as steed, through stealing to the surface with the intention of watching the movements of the enemy. He saw Gladwin just creeping back, after tying his horse securely, and by adroit work, the gaunt rascal accurately located the spot before turning back to warn his mates that matters were growing complicated mighty fast!

The rest had been easy enough, barring the act of capture itself, thanks to the secrets connected with that Uncanny Ranch. Only Silent Jackson had approached the building from the outside, and Old Snags left everything in readiness before sending out Dick Roper in response to that first signal whistle.

Gladwin's horse had disappeared from where he left it, but as no remarks were made on that point by any of the party, doubtless they knew what had become of the animal.

Close by was a little mound of yellow clay, partially covered with coarse grass, weeds and scrubby bushes, and a gaping hole in the center indicated a well, or rather an abortive attempt at striking water.

Making use of flat stones which lay about in seeming carelessness, thus leaving no foot-prints, Old Snags quickly descended this shaft, and when the bottom was reached, he fumbled around for a brief space, then produced a bull's-eye lantern, by the red glow of which Gladwin was quickly lowered at the end of the rope, his captors following.

The shaft was walled up with flat stones after the ordinary fashion. The bottom seemed solid, a number of stones lying there as though they had fallen from above at odd times. Only one thing differed from an ordinary well which had, from some unseen cause, "gone dry."

In one side of the shaft, a portion of the wall had been swung inward, on a hidden pivot, leaving ample space for a human being to pass through. When closed, this cunningly contrived door seemed nothing more or less than a portion of the wall itself.

Old Snags, bearing the lantern, led the way for his mates to follow. Silent Jackson brought up the rear, carefully closing the "door," thus removing all traces of their passage, even should strangers give the "dry well" a critical examination.

While this was being done, no words were dropped through which Kent Gladwin could accurately understand whither he was being transported, though, of course, he had an idea of the truth, so far as their actual movements could convey it.

It was a long journey, considering the weight they had to carry, and there were several pauses for rest and change of carriers. The whole was done in silence, even Old Snags seeming to realize the wisdom of prudence, at least.

With an eye to the future, Gladwin strove to

CHAPTER XV.

ONLY TO GET RECOVERED.

AT THE SAME TIME, the captives were being taken to the secret spot near the Uncanny Ranch, and a crowd of curious eyes were drawn about

mentally register the various crooks and turns, though he shrewdly suspected that a number of the shorter ones had been made expressly to bewilder him and foil any such attempt.

Muffled as his head was in the thick blanket, sound and feeling was of little service to him. He suspected he was underground, rather than above, since he could recall nothing like a cliff over which that descent might have been made, unless it was the canyon itself; and surely they had not carried him that far?

When he was rudely dumped to the ground for the last time, and the muffler jerked from his head by a rude hand, he winked and blinked, almost blinded by the lantern whose rays were turned squarely upon his face.

"Waal, how d'ye like it, fur's ye've got?" sibilated Old Snags, his hair, unconfined by a hat, seeming unusually bristly.

Owing to the gag between his jaws, Gladwin was unable to answer, even had he any inclination that way; but he seemed bent on making the best possible use of his eyesight, gazing keenly at that shaggy pate, making a mental note of the bristles, the protruding tusches and pouting lips.

Old Snags made no attempt to foil this inspection, though a man who led such a life as his, could hardly have mistaken its purpose. Indeed, he very obligingly shifted the lantern to cast its red rays more fully upon his repulsive face, grinning broadly as he drawlingly hissed:

"Purty duck, ain't I, critter? Reckon ye'll know me ag'in ef we's ever to meet on airt? When I was made, the mold was bu'sted, fer two sech beauties'd crowd this weenty world most oncomf'tably! An' yit—I'm bettin' big dollars to little cents that you'll never know me the next time we meet up 'ith each other!

"Shell I tell ye why? Waal, you'll be too powerful busy wonderin' what's shettin' off the wind o' ye, to ever think o' lookin' at t'other eend o' the rope; but I'll be right thar, Gopher Gabe!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SILENT JACKSON HUGS HIMSELF.

AS he uttered those words, Old Snag suddenly shot his bristling head forward, eagerly peering into the face of the sport, seemingly in hopes of making a discovery of importance.

If so, he was fated to be disappointed. If any change came over the features of the prisoner, it was a dull, fleeting wonder, nothing more.

"That's all right, critter," forcing a laugh as he drew back his head, nodding it vigorously to cover the look of chagrin he could not entirely keep out of his eyes in those first seconds. "You wouldn't 'a' never got to be what folks say ye air, ef ye didn't tote a cheek o' pure brass an' eyes o' glass. Yit—all the same—I know ye, critter! An' so'll the boss know ye when he comes this way the next time!

"I ain't axin' what devilment fetched ye up in these parts, critter, fer ye can't speak with yer jaws stretched so wide, an' ef ye could, nothin' better'n lies 'd come out, anyway. Then, too, reckon I kin fetch a mighty nigh guess at the why an' what fer, 'thout any help.

"Now, folks call you a mighty smart man, critter. Folks say you never yit met up 'ith your match fer keenness an' ginerat git-thar! Folks say the t'other man hain't bin born yit as kin even up with you. Yit, folks hev lied afore, an' I'm bettin' odds folks will lie ag'in, long a'ter you've turned to muck.

"Time was—I won't deny it, critter—time was when I reckoned you was raally pritty much all folks 'lowed, but sence you've boggled this bit o' snap in sech a fool way, I'm gittin' all over that idee. I reckon thar's bin a mighty sight o' stud-hoss luck come your way, sence you tuck to head-huntin'. Yes, I do, fer a solid fact!

"But now—you've come to the eend o' your rope, or I don't know the boss hafe so well as I reckon I do!"

Old Snags turned abruptly away from the prisoner, just as Silent Jackson came up, from paying a visit of inspection to their other captive.

"Found him all hunky, I reckon, pard?" asked Old Snags, all trace of his recent strong emotion vanishing as by magic.

Silent Jackson grunted assent, still feeling the imprudence of so many blunt words before Gladwin. Old Snags chuckled anew, then led his gaunt mate away, bearing the lantern with them.

"Ef the boss knowed how turrible loose that clapper o' yours was gittin', pard, he'd ram a rivet through it—an' clinch her on both sides, too!" sulkily remonstrated Jackson, as they moved toward their former station beneath the ruined ranch.

"Don't you trouble 'bout the boss an' me, pardner. Better give a look to your own failin's. Why, man, dear! ef you keep on growin' so dug-gun skeery, you'll break the reck o' ye runnin' way from yer own pritty shadder! Ye shorely will, Jacky!"

Jackson answered only by a sulky growl, and nothing further passed between the two worthies until they came to a halt beneath the Uncanny Ranch.

Picking out fairly comfortable seats, they

curled up and lit their pipes, then began idly talking over their latest capture. Some little time was consumed in this manner, when Jackson finally asked:

"Who'd ye reckon the critter is, anyway, Snags?"

"What's the use o' reckonin', when I know?" drawled his mate.

"Ye know! Honest? Who is he, then?"

"Mighty big game, I tell ye! Game as'll make the boss's eyes bulge out heap sight wuss then Goggles ever knowed how, an' his mouth to run water like a fresh spring!"

"Git out, you!" scoffed Jackson, yet sidling a bit closer in his excited curiosity. "You're stuffin' me, Snags!"

"That's all right. Stuffin' goes, ef it likes ye better. All the same, I'm reelin' it off straight as a bee-line. I say it flat; that pizen critter in yonder is jest nobody but Gopher Gabe!"

Silent Jackson fairly leaped to his feet in the intense excitement born of that positive assertion. His eyes "bulged out" much as Old Snags had pictured those of their chief, and for once his glib tongue lost its limberness.

"What! you don't—you can't—"

Before he could say more, and before Old Snags could spare him the trouble of saying it, a clear but not loud note came from no great distance, sweet and mellow as the echo of a silver bell.

"Whist!" sibilated Old Snags, rising up swiftly to his feet.

"It's the bell ringin'," mumbled Jackson, turning to peer through the darkness beyond.

"Shet! Ain't I got ears? Shet an' lis'en!"

The sweet echo died away, and silence reigned for a few seconds, during which the two men stood motionless as statues. Then, coming with a dull, harsh clang another sound broke the stillness.

"One!" muttered Old Snags, releasing his pent-up breath. "One o' the fambly, shore, but—who?"

The question had hardly passed his tusches, before that sound was repeated; the sound as of a pebble dropping from a height into a rusty tin pan.

"Two! It's the boss, shore 'nough, but why's he comin' this way?"

Still they stood motionless, waiting, listening intently, until the third sound made assurance complete. Then they moved away into the darkness, long usage rendering them independent of light, so far as the many cunning secrets of that uncanny place were concerned.

There was a hasty fumbling, followed by a slight creaking sound, after which came a dull, faint thump as of a heavy body striking the solid floor of the cavern.

"You, is it, Old Snags?" asked a deep, husky, mumbling voice. "Well, what's the news with you all?"

As he spoke, the new-comer moved over toward the lantern, pausing in the edge of its glow. He was pretty well muffled up in a heavy coat, and a black hood similar to those worn by the majority of the gang, covered his head and face, touching his shoulders all around.

"Ketched a couple o' prime fish, boss," hissed Old Snags, grinning.

"Two?" echoed the chief, plainly taken by surprise. "I thought— Who are they, old fellow?"

Enough has been said to show that Silent Jackson had his notion as to the long-hidden identity of their mysterious chief, and the recent shock administered by his mate had not entirely driven that notion from his busy brain.

That same notion was uppermost now, and while keeping a bit in the background, Jackson was mentally comparing that figure to Jordan Harpe, as to height and general dimensions. So far as he could tell, making due allowance for the muffling hood and heavy coat, there could be no material difference there. But his richest treat came when the chief plainly betrayed his surprise at there having been two prisoners taken, instead of only one.

In answer to that question Old Snags moved nearer, softly whispering the name of Gopher Gabe, chuckling anew as he marked the startling effect of his communication on his superior.

"No! you can't mean it, man!" ejaculated the chief, hoarsely.

"Come an' take a squint at the— Git out, you!" breaking off in angry disgust as he came into violent contact with Goggles as he turned about.

"Never mind Pop-eyes; lead on to your wonderful catch, Snags," impatiently growled his master.

"An' what's ketched you, Jack?" snapped Goggles, as he saw Silent Jackson doubling over and hugging himself as he noiselessly danced a double-shuffle in the gloom.

"Ketched—ketched the toothache, dug-gun it all!" mumbled the crafty knave, adroitly transforming his dance for joy into a pantomime of angry pain.

Old Snags leading the way, lantern in hand, the chief followed him closely, plainly wrought up to a high pitch of curiosity by that whispered name, and eager to inspect the prisoner.

Whether he misunderstood the wishes of his boss, or simply because he himself was too

greatly excited by that important (if true) capture, Old Snags turned into the wrong passage, the result being that he brought up at the edge of the chamber or cell in which Gregory Baird had been deposited, instead of the spot where Kent Gladwin lay in bonds.

He realized his mistake before fairly entering the cell, however, and turned toward his chief to ask:

"Shell I light him up, boss? Or," lowering his tones so that only the black-hood could catch them, "would ye ruther see the critter I named to ye, back yonder, the fu'st?"

"Who have you in here, then?" impatiently growled the chief, after a flashing glance into the ugly face of his guide.

"The old gent. Hed to drap him som'ers, ye know, an' then come the racket up to the ranch, when Jerd. Harpe an' his—"

A gloved hand shot out and gripped his arm with vicious violence.

"Stop! Back this way a bit—so!" facing Old Snags once more, when surely beyond earshot of any one lying in the dark cell ahead.

Through the twin slits in his hood, dark eyes were gazing at the old man with a power that seemed enough to scorch where their rays rested, but Old Snags never flinched, placidly bearing that inspection without showing either fear or wonder. He was simply a living machine, awaiting the directions of its owner.

"Tell me all that has happened, without omitting a single detail of importance, but crowd it into as few words as you can without making a botch of it. Go on!"

Old Snags obeyed, beginning with the abduction of Gregory Baird, telling it just as he had gleaned the main facts from the lips of Silent Jackson and Goggles.

From that he went on to tell of the search which the Square Ring gang made of the deserted ranch, and of the capture afterward made.

His master listened in silence, seemingly weighing each word as it was let drop, and though he showed no particular surprise at any one point, his manner certainly was not that of one who had already been familiar with aught that had taken place above ground.

"That'll do," he said, as Old Snags paused for breath at the end of his terse narrative. "Just step in yonder far enough to cast the light squarely on the face and figure of the old gent."

Old Snags did as directed, his face betraying only a dull malice as Gregory Baird stared angrily toward him, unable to move for his bonds, nor able to speak while that cruel gag held his jaws distended.

Presently a slight stamp notified him his chief was satisfied, so far, and Old Snags turned back to receive further orders.

"Lead the way to this second fish of yours. I'm curious to learn if your wonderful whale is anything bigger than a minnow!" said the boss, a sneer in his tones.

"Mebbe it's that way, boss," meekly sibilated the guide, "but ef it is, then I'm a sucker, to fill out the string o' fish!"

Old Snags quickly brought his master to where Kent Gladwin lay in bonds, casting the light squarely into his face, to give it the greatest effect, at the same time covertly but closely watching the chief.

His eyes won a double sparkle as he noted the quick start given by the masked figure as his gaze struck that handsome face; still handsome, though bearing sundry bruises as mementoes of that tough fight in the Uncanny Ranch.

A moment later this triumph was dashed a bit, for an ugly oath came from back of that hood, and the chief harshly spoke:

"Why did you fellows take so mighty much trouble? Why tote him in here?"

"Waal, he was playin' spy, an'—"

"I know; you explained all about that. Of course you had to put an end to his prowlings, but why not leave him where you found him? If any questions were asked, there'd be plenty of fools to lay it all to the spooks!"

Old Snags seemed taken aback, but after a brief hesitation he rallied, moving nearer his chief, to hiss guardedly:

"Mebbe I'm a fool, boss, but durned ef I don't b'lieve he's Gopher Gabe!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MAKING THE BEST OF IT.

IT may have been because he was better prepared to hear that odd title than when Old Snags first flung it at him, but the chief showed slight disturbance of any description. His keen eyes were fixed on the face of his fellow, but that gaze betokened contemptuous curiosity, if anything.

Old Snags was showing himself something more than a machine, now. He could feel, and feel most powerfully, or his looks belied him.

"What makes you reckon that way? What's got into you, anyway?" the man in the black hood asked, after a brief pause.

"I kin feel it in the bones o' me, boss!" declared Old Snags, his self-control growing less and less. "I kin—gi' me a chance to spit it out, boss, whar yen' lope-ear'd critter cain't ketch—ef ye don't mind, boss!"

The hand that touched his breast was tremb-

ling visibly, and as he felt that shiver above his heart, the chief gave way, falling back until they were safely beyond reach of even such keen ears as those owned by the captive sport.

Such conduct on the part of an old sinner whom he had regarded as emotional as a stone—no more—interested the black-cap, if only through rousing his curiosity.

"What's got into you, anyway, Snags?" he demanded, his eyes shining brightly in those red rays as he strove to read the full meaning expressed by that working countenance. "If I didn't know better I'd almost take oath you'd turned coward!"

"I don't reckon it's quite so bad as that, boss," his hissing voice the same as usual, but his grin a sickly counterfeit. "And yit—I hain't never felt the same critter ever sence we rounded up that p'izen varmint in yen!"

"He's your hoodoo, think?" with a thinly disguised sneer.

"Ef so, I hain't the fulst to be putt that way, boss! But ef it's a hoodoo, looks kinder like a back-action one, don't it? Hyar I be, head up an' han's free, a clean man o' my own. Thar he is, jest—"

"Just where he hadn't ought to be—just where you had no leave or license to fetch the rascal!" harshly interposed the black-cap.

"Ef we made a mistake, boss, 'twas 'long o' doin' the best we knowed how," responded Old Snags, with strange meekness for him.

As a rule, a more independent, reckless, devil-may-care sinner was not to be found among the entire gang. Even in the presence of their mysterious chief, Old Snags talked and acted like a highly privileged character; a fact which gave rise to the almost general belief that, if none other did, Old Snags knew just who and what that chief was.

A short, disagreeable laugh came from the black-cap.

"A blind man could tell that you'd either been up to your eyes in mischief, Old Snags, or else that you had a mighty favor to ask. Which horn of the dilemma will you perch on, this time?"

"Boss, mebbe I'm an ole fool fer sayin' of it, but—I'd give this left paw o' mine to know fer dead sure that's the p'izen critter!"

Involuntarily the black-cap shrunk back a pace, for with that uplifted hand, the sinewy fingers working like claws, backed by a viciously contorted visage, always repulsive, Old Snags more nearly resembled a demon as pictured in nightmare dreams, than aught purely human.

That shrieking was only momentary, and laughing at his own lack of nerve, the chief spoke again:

"Do you love him so much as that, daddy?"

"But I do—like p'izen!"

"Why not make sure work, then? Why not stamp the life out of his carcass, and throw it to the buzzards?"

"Bacca! I want to know fer dead sure!" was the swift response. "Beca'se I want to git shet o' the cussed haunts fer good an' all! An' ef I was to mash him afore I knowed dead sart'in he is the one, I'd hev 'em keep crawlin' 'round ontel—Boss, did ye ever hev a powerful skeer overketch ye that the time wasn't fur off when ye hed to turn up plum' crazy?"

"No. Don't you begin to croak about spooks and haunts and ghosts and hobgoblins, old sinner! As for devils, you'll never meet up with one more thorough than you are your own self!"

"But—boss?"

"Well, out with it, man!"

"Ef you'd jest try to pump the p'izen critter, an' let me do the lookin' on, under kiver, like, mebbe I'd git satisfied. Don't seem he could foolish all two both on us—does it?"

"Satisfied of what?"

"O' who he is, an' what to do 'ith him."

"You'd ought to know, without telling. There's only one rule that begins to touch his case: death to outsiders!"

A short, hard, hissing laugh came from that mass of foxy bristles.

"I do know, boss, but what I'm tryin' fer to make ye see is like this way: a common death'd do fer a common enemy, but ef this critter is really Gopher Gabe—an' I'm e'ena'most ready fer to take my 'davy he is!—then I want to hev the orderin' of his funeral!"

Unless those dark, glittering eyes betrayed their master, curiosity had been fighting with suspicion for several minutes, and now, with a swift movement, the black-cap took Old Snags by the shoulders, with a gloved hand on each, leaning forward to keenly examine his face.

The old man bore this ordeal without flinching, and the result was that curiosity gradually won the game.

"I can't just make you out, to-night, Snags! 'Pears like another body had crept into that hide of yours! But—what makes you hate that—this Gopher Gabe so intensely?"

"Help me to find out ef this critter is the p'izen critter, boss, an' then I'll tell ye the hull why-so. 'Tain't as ef I axed ye to let the mash-in' go clean: I'd kick like a bay steer ef you was to say turn the feller loose, a'ter all he's see'd an' tuck in with the two ears o' him. But I do ax ye to make him 'fess up fu'st."

"All right: I'll find his tongue, if that'll ease

you any," nodded his master, taking the bull's-eye lantern from his hand, and striding back to where Kent Gladwin was lying in bonds.

Placing the lantern on a projection of rock, in such a position that the strongest of its rays fell fairly upon the prisoner, the man in the black hood drew a knife and cut the stout thongs holding the uncomfortable gag in place.

"A bit rougher treatment than you counted on, isn't it?" he laughed, while thus employed. "Sorry, but such is life in the woolly West! If you have any apologies to offer, take your time: don't talk until your tongue is limber enough to wag without snapping short off, please!"

Kent Gladwin seemed inclined to accept that mocking advice, for, instead of bursting into a flood of curses and threats, as the chief evidently expected, he cautiously worked his jaws, moistening his parched lips, at the same time scanning that disguised figure like one who hopes to gain a clew for future use.

"I wouldn't bother, were I you, stranger," laughed the chief, wickedly, as he noted this examination. "You'll learn naught, and never have the chance to benefit by it, even if you should pick up a clew."

"All right, Mister Man: fire ahead!"

"Good! You're no cur, whatever else may be said."

"Praise from Sir Hubert— By the way, is that your name?"

"Age before beauty, always. What is your name?"

"Kent Gladwin."

"Whither from?"

"My last boarding-place."

"What motive brought you to this region?"

"No motive, loco or otherwise, but a horse. Tell your imps to handle him with care, please, for he's only borrowed."

"Precisely; and he'll stay borrowed, too, until a fair price is offered for his hide and what's inside of it," laughed the chief.

"Then you are all horse-thieves here?"

"What did you take us for?"

"Bigger fools than I found—worse luck me!" with a rueful sigh that was not wholly assumed.

"If your lips can shape the truth—and your last speech sounds pretty close to the right ring—why not give your own name and title, instead of claiming that of a better man?" a bit sharply demanded the masked knave.

"By which you mean to insinuate—just what?"

"You called yourself Kent Gladwin, and—"

"That is my name, sir."

"One of them, possibly," with a sneer. "Report says you have a vast and varied assortment to select from, but what I mean is this: You are the human bloodhound men call Gopher Gabe!"

"Was that what your lovely assistant drew you back beyond earshot to communicate?"

"What matter, so long as it is the truth?"

"Nothing much, only, if I stood in your shoes—which Heaven forefend—I'd fire him for trying to stuff me with infernal lies!"

"Then you flatly deny being Gopher Gabe?"

"Why not, since it is the naked truth?"

"According to your say-so! All right; play you are not that ghostly detective of whom we hear so much and see so precious little! Say you are what you do lay claim to, and that your legal name is Kent Gladwin. And having granted, or agreed to all this, suppose we get down to solid business?"

"Good as old wheat! Just set my all-fours at liberty, give me five minutes in which to get up a circulation once more, and if I don't fill your hands so chuck full of solid business that you'll yell for help to hold the surplus, call me a howling liar—or even Gopher Gabe!"

Despite himself, the man in the sable hood was forced to chuckle with amusement at this superb exhibition of "cheek." Still, he showed no signs of complying with that modest request, even after such a rich inducement.

"Did you ever hear of such a thing as being too fresh, Mr. Gladwin?" he asked, after a bit.

"Better fresh than stale, Mr.— Beg pardon! Would you mind repeating your name, my dear fellow? It's slipped my tongue."

"Sudden Death—so far as you are concerned. But before I prove to you how prophetically I was christened, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what you were doing when my fellows dropped onto you?"

"Why don't you ask me something hard? I was simply looking out for some of the spooks rumor says make their nests about this region. In a word, I was out ghost-hunting!"

"Then—you admit playing the spy?"

"Why not? Your fellows caught me in the act, so there's no use in trying to lie, even if that wasn't against my principles. But if I was engaged in anything wrongful, you'd ought to shoulder at least one-half the blame."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I simply followed the suit you led; that I was imitating the example you set me."

"That's a lie!"

"Then your lips utter it, Jordan Harpe!" retorted Gladwin, with a sternness in strong contrast with the moderate tone he had up to that moment maintained.

The masked man gave a start, like one shrink-

ing from a totally unexpected blow, but as his glittering eyes detected a sneering smile dawning upon that handsome face, he quickly rallied.

"What makes you call me by that name, fool?"

"Are you so utterly ashamed of it, Jordan Harpe?"

"I might be, if 'twas mine by rights, but—What do you take me for, anyhow, confound you, Gopher Gabe?"

"For what I know you are: Jordan Harpe, master of the Square Ring Ranch! If you want me to draw your character any more—"

"All right!" with a low, hard laugh. "I owe him no great love, and you might as well pass your last hour yelping along the wrong trail!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

KICKING AGAINST THE PRICKS.

WITHOUT further words, the chief turned about and passed from Kent Gladwin's sight into the shadows.

"You ain't givin' over so easy, boss!" hissed Old Snags, who had evidently been watching and listening during that interview. "Surely you kin pinch the p'izen critter ontel he lets the truth leak out?"

"Do your own pinching, Snags," with an ugly echo in his voice. "He took the wrong trail, and I'm too willing he should stick to that scent while he lives, to run the risk of teaching him better."

"Then I kin work my own way with him, boss?" eagerly asked Snags, rubbing his hands together and shifting nervously on his feet.

"Do what you like, just so you don't let him get away. He's too cool a hand, Gopher Gabe or not, to have running at will. Is there a light where you stowed the old man?"

"Pop-eyes is watchin' over him, an' I reckon he's too mighty 'feared 'o haunts fer to do it 'thout a glim."

"All right: then I'll leave you the bull's-eye. Call some of the boys to lend a hand, then tote that fellow back to the round hole. If he's still living when you get through pinching him, set some one to keep an eye in his direction. Run no chances. Understand?"

"Ef he gits away, you kin swaller my head, boss!" grinned Old Snags, working his jaws until his yellow tusches made one think of a wicked old boar, working up his evil passions.

"Give me a hedgehog, for choice, old sinner," laughed his master, turning away and threading the black passage with an ease and lightness of foot which proved his long acquaintance with the cavern.

It was as Old Snags had reported: there was a light in the chamber where Gregory Baird had been stowed away, and squatting on his haunches just within the circle of light, Goggles was sleepily pulling away at a rank pipe, crammed with ranker tobacco.

At that cat-like footfall he turned swiftly, one hand dropping to the butt of a revolver, his great eyes fairly hanging out upon his high cheekbones as he glared in quest of the author of that sound.

"Who's a-comin', or—"

"Never a haunt, Pop-eyes," laughed his chief, coming into view. "Have you found any, yet? I see none has carried you off!"

"Not yit—thanks to the ole har-foot, boss," came the response, as Goggles rose erect with a salute and sickly grin. "But I'm lookin' fer it to happen, 'most any minnit, and then mebbe—"

"Suppose you take a little walk, Pop-eyes, and see if you can't run across one or two. I want to chin a bit with the old gent, and I never could endure folks listening. Fact, I always waste a cartridge whenever I find any one an inch or so too close behind me. See?"

"Ef ye ketch me sneakin', boss, don't leave 'nough fer a spook to hitch onto!" grinned Goggles, immediately taking his departure.

With the coast thus cleared, the man in the disguise showed no particular haste to begin the conversation he hinted at, but stood near the entrance to this particular cell, his arms folded across his chest, his glittering gaze bent upon his helpless prisoner.

Gregory Baird was uncomfortably propped against the side wall of the cell, unable to better his position lest the effort should make matters still worse, since his bonds rendered him well nigh helpless.

The gag which had been forced between his jaws when Old Snags brought the warning of threatened trouble, had not yet been removed, and it did not require a second look to realize that the old gentleman was fully as uncomfortable in body as he could be in mind.

He was lying so that he could see his latest visitor, and there was an angry, undaunted glitter in his eyes, bloodshot though they had grown since his capture.

"I hoped to find you in a more agreeable mood, dear sir," hoarsely spoke the black-cap, coming forward, one hand seeking a knife in the belt under his muffling coat. "But time presses, and I can't well wait for the wind to shift to a more comfortable quarter. So—you'll be the worst sufferer if the frost comes for a nip or two!"

A little clumsily, like one who is unaccustomed to have his fingers confined in gloves, the chief felt for the thong holding the gag, separating it from the luxuriant beard worn by his captive. This, in the haste with which the gagging had been done, was tangled up in the knot, and with a care that was a grim sarcasm in itself, under the circumstances, the outlaw severed the cord and disentangled the hairs, then gently smoothed the patriarchal beard in its proper place.

"Get out—devil!" gasped Baird, angrily, as the first use of his regained powers of articulation.

"Gently, dear sir," mocked his captor, but moving back like one who fully expected a snap from those still strong, white teeth. "The more you kick against the pricks, the sharper will be the sting. You're old enough to be sensible; if you're lacking in that respect, at least try to make believe you're not entirely witless!"

"You devil!" hoarsely grated the infuriated speculator, trying his best to burst the bonds confining his arms, the effort causing him to slip sideways, where he lay helpless on the hard floor.

"Didn't I tell you so, Gregory, dear?" mocked the chief, with a wicked laugh as he stood watching those vain struggles. "Say you're sorry you wasn't smart enough to take a hint, and I'll prop you up on your beam-ends once more."

"I'll get even with you for this, Jordan Harpe!" still more angrily grated his victim, his glowing eyes fixed upon his tormentor, despite his awkward position.

The chief laughed anew at the sound of that name, nor did he give a start such as had betrayed his surprise when Kent Gladwin called him by that title. No doubt he was getting used to the mistake, or else he no longer cared what or whom his prisoners might deem him.

"What devil's work are you up to, anyway?" added Baird, making an effort to control his just indignation sufficiently to get at the full truth of this outrage. "What do you hope to gain by treating me after this shameful manner?"

"Are those questions addressed to me, or to Jordan Harpe?"

"To both in one, confound you!"

"Then you really take me for the Square Ring sharp?"

"I know you are! You can't deny it—you can't look me in the eyes and say that you're not Jordan Harpe!"

"I am not Jordan Harpe," deliberately declared the man in the black hood, leaning forward a bit and fixing his gaze on Baird's eyes, like one only too willing to stand the test proposed.

"And you lie like a dog when you say so."

"All right!" resuming his former position. "I'm beginning to get used to it, so—I'm Jordan Harpe, for the occasion!"

"I know you are, curse you for a cowardly, treacherous cur!"

"Dip lightly, my dear sir! I'm the sweetest tempered mortal you ever had the honor of consorting with, but there's reason in all things, and a limit which not even you can pass without paying the penalty. In other words, the milder you behave, the lighter will be your ransom."

Although these words were spoken with unusual suavity of tone, Gregory Baird was still wise enough to see that they meant danger; and though it came very hard, recalling all he had suffered through this graceless villain, he made an effort at smothering his rage.

"I'll give you as little excuse for playing the cowardly brute as possible," he said, speaking more evenly, though his eyes still shone with fire, longing for revenge. "So—what sort of game are you trying to play with me, Jordan Harpe?"

"I tell you that I am not the Square Ring sharp."

"Then prove it, if you dare! Take off that hood, and show your face in the light, if you're not the one I say!"

With a short, easy laugh, the chief shook his hooded head.

"Thanks, but I must decline your proposition. You would not recognize my face, but others might; and I prefer remaining just as great an enigma to my men as I surely am to you, dear sir."

"You're no new hand at a lie, anyway, but let that point pass for the present. You planned my capture, at all events; why did you do it?"

"Simply as a promising speculation. I saw big money in it."

"Bah!" with strong contempt in eyes and voice. "The days of brigandage and ransom extorting belong to the moldy past!"

"Well play the contrary just for luck. As I've got precious little at stake, on my side, all I gain will be just so much profit. See?"

"What do you hope to gain?"

"Money—no less!"

Those strong teeth met with a sharp click, and that lurid glow intensified in the dark gray eyes, while his voice deepened into savage resolution as he grated:

"You'll never get a dollar out of me by this

foul outrage! You may butcher me by inches, but I'll stick to that: not a penny shall you finger of mine while you hold me in durance, though you try for a dozen years!"

"Then I'll collect a commission from your legal heirs," laughed his captor, with devilish meaning in his tones.

Gregory Baird was bold as the majority of men, and really believed that there was not a drop of cowardly blood in his veins; but as he heard that voice and looked into those glittering eyes, seemingly rendered all the brighter for the surrounding shade, a cold thrill of fear crept over his body. Those words meant death, and he could no longer doubt it.

Whether or no the man in the black cowl detected this, his manner changed abruptly, and he cast aside all false gentleness from that moment.

"That's enough idle talk, Gregory Baird," he said, drawing a little nearer, squatting down in front of his captive as though to bring their eyes in closer connection. "Now I'm going to get right down to solid business. I mean every word I say, and if you're not a bigger idiot even than you have tried to make out, you'll think twice before throwing away a single chance: be sure I'll offer you a precious few!"

"I've not gone into this speculation with my eyes shut. I took stock before making the first open move. I know to a dollar how your bank account stands, and to a copper how much ready cash you can show up outside of that; but I'll not go the whole hog, unless you force me to play it, bristles and all. I'll simply strike you for the amount you were about to pay Jordan Harpe on the nail."

"Strike and be—! I'll never give up a dollar to such an infernal scoundrel as you are proving yourself!"

Forgetting his recent resolutions, remembering only what he had already suffered through this evil wretch, Gregory Baird burst forth in furious rage. At that moment, if given his choice between suffering death at those hands, or paying into them a single dollar, he would unhesitatingly have chosen the former.

"Go easy, old gent!" growled the chief, his eyes glittering wickedly as he spoke. "Talk is cheap, but when it comes to croaking, a few big round dollars will dwindle in size and value until a handful of mustard seed would look like cannon balls of solid gold in comparison!"

"Not a dollar—not a penny!"

"So your tongue shapes, but your brain don't back up the words. You are lying, Gregory Baird, and time will prove it. Not such a remote era, either!"

"I say it now—I'll say it over and over again, even with my latest gasp; not one miserable dollar of mine shall ever cross your thievish palm!"

"If you really stick to that text, Gregory Baird, your latest breath will not be long in knocking at your teeth for an exit. But—I can strip the pelt from a cat in more styles than one. Common killing is entirely too vulgar, when one can do so much better. Then, too, about the worst possible use you can put a man to, is to kill him. So—I'll prove myself more of an artist in your case, and if you persist in playing the stubborn fool, maybe your children will show better sense!"

Gregory Baird gave a start, then gasped, hoarsely:

"You demon! What do you mean by—by that?"

"That failing to come to terms with you, I'll bargain with your son and daughter!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A MAN WITHOUT MERCY.

THE tone used, even more than the words themselves, gave Gregory Baird a terrible shock, and with an instinctive desire to hide his hurts, his eyes closed, and his lips were tightly compressed to keep back the groan of apprehension which rose in his throat.

Even in his most despondent moments since recovering sufficiently to fairly realize what sort of mishap had befallen him, he had never once thought of those dear absent ones being drawn into trouble by the dastards who were scheming against him.

Even now—

"Which is why I hinted at moderation on your part, my dear fellow," chuckled the chief, watching his victim far too closely not to note and rightly interpret that evidence. "You're a tough old rooster, and, I dare say, able to stand considerable punishment before showing the white feather; but how about your gallant young cockerel, or that tender young pullet, Miss Flora?"

"You devil!"

"As you did me the honor to remark at least once before," bowed his tormentor, mockingly. "Try to be original, Gregory, if the strain isn't too awfully hard! I'm growing very critical in my old age, and if you should be unlucky enough to set my teeth on edge, I'll jump the bargain I offered you, and open negotiations with the young folks."

"Thank Heaven! they are well out of your reach, Jordan Harpe!" cried Baird, beginning to rally from that unexpected shock.

"Are you still harping on that string? Do you never drop a fool notion after once picking it up?" harshly asked the black cap.

"Prove that I am wrong, and I'll beg his pardon for coupling his name with a cowardly cur. Show me the face you are hiding behind that mask, and clear an innocent man—if you dare!"

"You actually seem to believe it!" in real or well-assumed wonder.

"Who else can I think you?" persisted Baird, more than willing to change from the other subject, at least until his shaken nerves could grow steady again. "Who else knows what I was asked to pay down in hard cash, in case the bargain was closed?"

"I do, for one," laughed the arch villain.

"Who but Jordan Harpe could have stolen the letter intended for me, warning me how to beware how I put my trust in such a devil? Who, I ask you, thief, thug, coward? Bah!" with intense bitterness. "Possibly you will deny having lost that stolen note back there by the spring, when you stole out of the way to let your no less dastardly tools creep up and strike a man down from behind?"

Swiftly came those words, and though the accused tried to carry it off with a high hand, there was a vague something about his manner that made Gregory Baird still more positive he had hit the truth in fixing this outrage upon the master of Square Ring Ranch.

"Of all fools, commend me to—Gregory Baird!" sneered the man in the sable cowl, bowing profoundly.

"If I am wrong—if Harpe is innocent of this vile outrage—how can you explain that note?" persisted Baird.

"What note?"

"The paper I was studying when your evil imps did their dastardly work. They must have it—unless they've turned it over to the head thief—yourself!"

Turning his back, facing the entrance, the chief sounded a trill on a whistle or through the aid of his fingers. This signal was promptly answered by Silent Jackson, to whom the black cap spoke sharply:

"Did you find a letter, note, or paper of any description, which this gentleman might have been studying at the time you bagged him?"

"That was a sort o' paper, boss," hesitated the outlaw.

"What have you done with it? Pass it over, and—"

"I'll fetch it, boss. I was sorter showin' it to a pard when—"

"Go send him here. Take his place if he is on duty. Off with you!"

Silent Jackson skurried away, well content to escape so readily.

For a few minutes silence reigned, neither captive nor captor seeming anxious to speak. Then Old Snags came into the light, handing his master a soiled paper, stating:

"I clean forgot the bevin' of it, boss, 'long o' gittin' so powerful stirred up over that— You know!"

"Never mind dropping more than you have to, old man. That tongue of yours will twist a rope for your neck, one of these days! Get out!" harshly growled his master, snatching away the bit of paper.

Like Silent Jackson, Old Snags did not stand on the order of his departure, but swiftly vanished amidst the gloom.

The black cap moved a little closer to the light, slowly reading the veiled warning which has already been placed before the reader, and which need hardly be repeated in this connection. While thus engaged, he betrayed neither anger nor surprise, and Gregory Baird learned nothing from his eager scrutiny the while.

"What is it you expect to prove by this note, Mr. Baird?" at length asked the chief, turning an inquiring gaze upon his captive.

"That Jordan Harpe intercepted a sealed letter intended for my eyes alone! That he lost it, that I found it, that—"

"This is the house that Jack built!" interrupted the chief, with an irritable laugh. "Grant all that; grant Jordan Harpe is all you say: but I deny the conclusion you draw. I am not Harpe. I never set eyes on this precious bit of paper before, though I'm rather glad it has come to my hands, since through it I may be able to solve a doubt which has puzzled me not a little this evening."

"Show your face, and if it isn't that of Jordan Harpe, I'll begin to believe you're a shade less evil than I now reckon you up," persisted Baird, clinging to that point with characteristic obstinacy.

"I'll show you my hand instead, my dear fellow," laughed the chief, stowing the paper away in his bosom, then drawing nearer his captive. "I'll say no more on that point. Believe me the Square Ring sharp if you can extract any consolation from that notion. I can stand it, if you and he can—surely!"

"You might as well drop the whole subject, I'll never bend an atom, though you try from now until the crack of doom!" doggedly declared the speculator.

"Wait a bit before you register such a rash oath, my dear fellow. About the bitterest morsel a man can get away with, is when he

has to eat his own words, spoken too hastily. As I said, I'll give you a glimpse of the cards I hold, when you may look at the game a bit differently.

"You seem to think that no one in this part of the country knows aught of your financial standing, or home affairs, save Jordan Harpe?"

"He and I alone can know what amount of cash was to be paid down in case the bargain was struck. I said as much before. I repeat it now. If you have this information, that alone is positive proof that you are he—or that you and he are playing partners in this game!"

"Have it so, if you prefer," with a low, sneering laugh. "Business is business, and I've lost far too much time trying to open your eyes, already. I'll just give you a few personal items, to show how well I'm posted, then give you my ultimatum."

"First, you agreed to pay Jordan Harpe, in hard cash, the sum of fifty thousand dollars, as the first installment, in case everything on and about the Square Ring Ranch, including cattle, horses, and outfit in general, proved to be just as he represented them. Am I not right?"

Gregory Baird made no response. A sulky fit seemed to be upon him, and after a brief pause, the chief continued:

"Silence is supposed to give consent, and we'll call that point squarely settled. I could tell you of the other payments, which were nearly settled upon, if I saw fit; but I'm a hard cash dealer, and have no time to wait for notes to mature."

"I offered to swap your freedom for this bit of cash, but you declined the offer."

"So I will, from now until the crack of doom!"

"I set you down as being cursed with a mulish disposition when matters turned across the grain," nodded the black-headed, easily, in no wise disconcerted by that savage interruption. "And to have another argument in readiness to hold under your nose, I took the trouble to look up your family relations. I found out—'twould be too long a story to say just how I got around the difficulties, Gregory, so we'll omit that part, for the present. As I started to say, I found out that you were a widower, with two living children; a son named Victor, about of age, and a daughter called Flora, some two years younger."

"You devil!" groaned Baird, unable to choke back his powerful emotions longer. "Do what you will with me, but let—Baird!" rallying once more, by a desperate effort. "You may have sneaked out so much, but even your infernal ingenuity can't reach far enough to harm my boy and little girl!"

"Right there's where you do me another bit of injustice, Gregory," laughed his tormentor. "You never tire of asserting that you know me from start to finish, yet with every other sentence you prove only too plainly that you don't even begin to know me! For instance: instead of being safely at your home in Chicago, as you no doubt flatter yourself, your son and daughter are at this very moment making all haste to rejoin their dear daddy, in answer to his urgent telegram, bidding them meet him at Longhorn, on most important business!"

"You lie, curse ye!" snarled the tortured man, once more engaging in a hopeless effort to burst the bonds which held him so helpless at the mercy of this villain.

"On the contrary, Gregory Baird, I'm dealing out straight goods to you, and the sooner you begin to realize that fact, the better 'twill be for all hands," coldly persisted the chief. "I didn't enter this little game without first smoothing over all the difficult places, for I knew right well that if I should make even a single false step, I'd be called on to pay the penalty of my carelessness."

"I found out just how much ready money you could command, at an hour's notice. I found out your one weak point—and anticipating your kicking, set the wires to working in advance."

"I wired your son, at your home in Chicago, to come without delay to Longhorn, bringing his sister with him. I caused that message to be sent after such a fashion that in case of trouble hereafter, there could not be a single clew by which my agency could be traced. For, of course, this admission to you counts for nothing, since you can't even guess who I am."

"Now, you are Jordan Harpe."

"Didn't I tell you so?" with a sneering laugh. "The poor devil will not only find his bargain off, but have to stand all the racket in addition! But that don't count, and I'm drifting from my scheme."

"Your children are on their way here, and about due at Longhorn as I am speaking. I have made proper arrangements for their reception, you can rest assured. They will be met and taken tender care of, when they step out of the stage at Longhorn. As to what may befall them after that, a good deal depends upon yourself, Gregory!"

"I don't—I'll never believe you!" snarled the helpless man.

And yet, despite his fierce denial, he did begin to believe—how could he help it, being a true and loving parent?

"You're giving the gentle recording angel a powerful sight of work to do, not to get left be-

hind, my dear fellow," mocked his enemy. "If you keep on as you've begun, Eli Perkins and Joe Mulhatton—to say nothing of the genial Tom o' Texas—will have to hustle mighty lively to keep out of the dust at your heels! But—business, Gregory Baird!"

"Whether you believe it or not, two more suns will hardly rise and set before I'll have your entire family gathered beneath this hospitable roof. Then—if I can't strike a bargain with their stubborn dad, I'll try what pinching the children will do! Or, who knows? If the gentle Flora should happen to strike my artistic eye, maybe I'll—"

The sound of rapid but unsteady footsteps cut his speech short, and as he jumped to his feet with an angry snarl, a strange looking figure blundered into the cell, to trip and fall in a kicking, howling heap!

CHAPTER XX.

SILENT JACKSON HEARS SOMETHING DROP.

ALTHOUGH the stern manner in which his chief had addressed him in regard to that bit of paper, startled Silent Jackson out of his mood of self-gratulation for the moment, his fright did not last long, and by the time he had taken the place of Old Snags as guard over Kent Gladwin, in the rock-chamber known as the Round Hole, he was once more grinning broadly as he metaphorically bugged himself.

True, it might have puzzled him to say in just what manner he was to benefit by the discovery which he flattered himself he had made, if he had taken time to ask himself that particular question.

Still, there had been so much guarded speculation among the members of that lawless gang, as to who and what "the boss" really was, but which had been so completely baffled by the precautions taken and never for an instant forgotten by their chief, that the fact of his having been acute enough to solve the riddle, was reward enough to satisfy a man who held such an elevated opinion of himself as did Silent Jackson.

Then, too, after a dim, vague fashion, the silent member of the family felt that, in case trouble should overtake the gang, he would be none the worse off for having a hold of some sort on the head, not alone as chief offender against an outraged law, but as the rich, honored and wholly reputable head of the Square Ring Ranch.

"Fer him it is, an' I'm bankin' all my good dingshats onto it!" the gaunt knave chuckled, for the moment forgetful of those cool, keen eyes watching him from the head of the captive sport.

"Tickle me, and I'll try to help you laugh it out, lengthy!" said Gladwin, by no means broken in spirit by his dangerous predicament.

"Eb? Oh, you shot!" ejaculated the rogue, giving a start that caused his pipe to fall into his lap, scorching his hairy paws before he could shake off the glowing bits of tobacco.

"All right, Mr. Ferguson," nodded Kent, with a counterfeited shudder and exaggerated look of disgust before closing his lids. "I didn't know you were such a hideously ugly specimen of wickedness, else I'd never have pulled the wire to set you going. Forget it, and hold your tongue until I'm asleep—will you?"

At another time Silent Jackson might have taken offense at that very plain speech, but just at present he had too much cause for feeling good-natured. Then, too, he was himself reckless enough to admire the same quality in another, and this sort of coarse wit just fitted his mental caliber.

"I'd do most anything to please ye, critter, bein' as 'tain't none so sure ye'll hev time to ax more'n one or a couple more favors," he grinned, "but I really can't do it, boss! It's a duty I owe to a feller critter that's on his death-bed, so to speak, to chirk him up a bit, an' sarter prepare his mortal mind fer the terrible hyar-after, which is a-rollin' on like a fresh gwine down a hill that's straight up an' down, fer—"

"Open your mouth a little wider, please! Hold your head back, so's the light can enter—still further, please!"

Involuntarily Silent Jackson obeyed that first command, but as the sport spoke on, his jaws came together with a clash, and his chin sunk quickly toward his chest.

"Git out, dug-gun ye!" he growled, harshly.

"Think I'm a durn fool?"

"Do I think it?" drawled Gladwin, with a sleepy smile. "No, I know it, Johnny!"

"What ye tryin' fer to git through ye anyway, critter?" with an ominous scowl across the space dividing them.

"What do—oh," stifling a yawn in its birth.

"I just wanted to find out whether your tongue was hinged in the middle, or had been split when you were a kid—that's all."

"Dug-gun smart, ain't ye?"

"Thanks, Mr. Ferguson. You're not near such a fool as your looks would indicate. Good-night. I'm feeling a bit sleepy, don't you know?"

"I'd say ye was beginnin' fer to feel yer oats ruther," chuckled Jackson, his fit of anger at being played with vanishing like a mist before the

fore a genial sun. "You're a tough 'un, you be, critter!"

"Good-night, Mr. Ferguson," drawled Gladwin, with closed lids. "I reckon I forgot to tell you before."

Silent Jackson grinned at this, but for a few minutes he remained squatting on his haunches under the light hanging to the wall, pulling away at his rank pipe, actually letting his tongue lie idle for so long.

To all outward seeming, Kent Gladwin really meant what he said in regard to feeling sleepy. Although his position was anything but comfortable, and there was nothing more substantial than his clothes to keep his bruised flesh from coming in contact with the uneven floor of rock, he could hardly have looked more content had he been in his own bed, with limbs at liberty to sprawl over "both sides and the middle too!"

And, after a short time, his regular breathing grew louder, gradually sliding into a gentle and gentlemanly snore, which brought a grin of positive approval into the gaunt visage of his guardian for the occasion.

"I say, pardner!" softly croaked Silent Jackson.

A slightly more pronounced snore was his sole answer.

"I say, pardner!" the man of silence repeated, a little louder, but with the same result.

"Waal, ef you ain't a cool 'un, then I wouldn't say so! With the boss gittin' a good ready fer to shot off the wind o' ye—an' I ain't sayin' I blame him any too much, ef you're really the pizen critter Old Snags sets ye up fur bein'—an' hyar ye lay, sleepin' like a weenty kid that's drapped off the tit 'long o' not hev'in' room fer any more suck!"

Silent Jackson was honest in his admiration, for he was a man who could appreciate pure grit in another, even when that other was an enemy; but, at the same time, Silent Jackson loved to talk, and his liking for an audience even of one, was pretty near as great. Then, too, this cool sport had fairly "got the rig on him," shortly before, and it was a rule of his to "play even" as often as possible.

As he sat there gazing at that placid face, a smile gradually dawned upon his gaunt visage, and pulling a few bits of rank plug tobacco from his pocket, he fell to grinding them into dust, using his horny knuckles and a still hornier palm as a mill.

"Ye keep the nose o' ye too mighty clean fer to be a snuffer, critter," he mumbled, his head bobbing up and down in anticipatory glee. "An' so ye don't begin fer to know how mighty much ye're losin' out o' the good things o' life; no ye don't, now, fer a scan'alous fact! An' sc—ef I kin ever git this dug-gun nigger-head fine 'nough!" he broke off, with an impatient growl, fearing lest Gladwin waken up before he could fairly put his rare jest into execution.

"I never see a lay-out that fitted better, takin' it all in a lump," he mumbled, forgetting his brief anger in anticipating what was soon to come. "Thar's other noses as I've met up with, that had a more open countenance, so to call it; that had a wider blow-hole; but never one that 'peared to draw freer, an' that's jest what's wanted most in a 'portant 'periment like this—yes, it is, now!"

Kent Gladwin was reclining with his shoulders against the rock wall, and it chanced that just where he happened to be deposited, a bump fitted neatly to his neck, while his head found a slight depression in the rock. This threw his head back a little, and really the situation seemed to fully justify the opinion expressed by Silent Jackson.

Still, things are not always as they appear on the surface, and so far from being asleep, Kent Gladwin was never wider awake in the whole course of his life, than at that precise moment.

It had been no difficult task to sum up this new guardian, and it was in hopes of hearing him talk that the sport played sleepiness, rather than to escape the clatter of his weariless tongue.

Though his lids were closed, they were not so tight but that their owner could see every movement made by the outlaw, and though he readily divined the trick for which Silent Jackson was preparing, the fingers of that worthy were in far greater danger than Gladwin's nose.

But then, while Silent Jackson was busily engaged in reducing his bits of tobacco to snuff, Kent Gladwin found other matter of decidedly greater interest; and though his closed lids did not even flutter, his gaze was intently fixed on a dusky shape which was just creeping into the faint circle of light, directly behind the chuckling schemer.

It was difficult to make out just what that shape was, but Gladwin knew it must be a human being. And knowing this, he also knew that it must mean harm to the watcher rather than the seeming sleeper!

Not a sound came to warn Silent Jackson as that dusky heap slowly crept nearer, then rose up until it looked more like a human being; to swing aloft a sausage-like sand-club, then bring it down with a paralyzing force full upon the bowed head of the unsuspecting outlaw!

Not even a gasp came from Silent Jackson as he fell forward.

CHAPTER XXI.

"GO IT BLIND, OR FARE WORSE."

"Not a word, if you love your life!"

In low, guarded, yet curiously distinct tones came that hasty warning from the muffled-up stranger, almost in the very instant so well employed in disposing of Silent Jackson.

Kent Gladwin no longer counterfeited sleep, and with a curiosity perfectly natural in one under the circumstances, he was trying his best to make out what manner of being this was who had so unexpectedly come to his assistance.

He could not well doubt that this being was a friend in need, after his choice of victim, and just as naturally he took those words as intended for himself, promptly answering:

"All right, pardner! Cut me loose, and I'll use my hands instead of my clapper!"

If the stranger heard that request, he certainly showed no inclination to grant it, just then, at all events.

His crouching figure bent still lower for a single breath, seemingly to assure himself that Silent Jackson did not require another dose of the same sort, then he sprang to the wall, reaching up and turning the light lower, until it gave little more than a flicker of light.

"I say, stranger!" hurriedly expostulated Gladwin, a disagreeable thrill replacing that first joy-bath. "Don't run away until after you've cut me free, I beg of you, man dear!"

"Quiet! Another word before I'm ready to hear you, and I'll leave you to deal with these devils as best you can!"

Sharp, clear, cold yet stinging, these words seemed barely able to reach the ears for which they were intended, yet at the same time Kent Gladwin felt that thunder itself could hardly have sounded louder.

He began to doubt whether he had not been a little premature in hailing this muffled-up shape as a friend, and while watching the further movements of the strange being as well as the dim light would permit, he had time for wondering whether his treatment at those hands would be much more acceptable.

Having dimmed the light to suit his notions, the stranger put up his sand-club, leaving both hands at liberty for the disposal of Silent Jackson.

He did not betray much of any love or reverence for that gaunt jester, pulling and hauling his limp, unresisting figure about, much as though he cared nothing whether it fell to pieces in his hands or not.

His first move was to unclasp the buckle which held the belt of arms about Silent Jackson's middle, giving the whole a gentle swing that landed them fairly out of the way, without running any risk of a dangerous explosion.

This left nothing particularly in the way of carrying out his second idea, which was to pull the senseless fellow's heavy flannel shirt free from his trowsers, turning it wrong side outward, bringing the flaps up over his head, where he twisted them tightly together.

In order to do this successfully, Silent Jackson's arms had to be disposed of, but with the aid of a stout thong, that was seen to, then another strong cord promised to keep that unique muffler in place until outside assistance should reach the luckless jester.

With an interest which may be imagined, Kent Gladwin watched all that passed before him, dimly though the light shone. He was by no means so confident, now, that this mysteriously muffled creature was the benevolent friend and rescuer whom he had welcomed at first sight.

True, he was disposing of the armed man placed there as guard, but if Silent Jackson was really an enemy, would the stranger lose so many valuable seconds in doing what could be so much more easily wrought by another stroke with that sand-club?

If an enemy to the outlaws, he surely ought to know that he was liable to interruption by one or more of them, at any instant. And, if really a friend to the prisoner, would he not have at once set him at liberty, if only to have his aid in the highly probable fight against heavy odds?

With such reflections chasing each other through his busy brain, Kent Gladwin had occupied far more agreeable situations in his life.

He strained his eyes to the utmost, trying to make out something definite about the stranger, but with a woeful lack of success. The light burned very dimly. The stranger was so thoroughly muffled up that only his position told the difference between his head and his feet. And Silent Jackson lay almost directly beneath the light, their persons being thus cast into shadow.

The doubts which had been growing in Kent Gladwin's mind were by no means lessened when the stranger reached up to completely extinguish the light, the instant he had drawn the last knot in the cord twisted about Silent Jackson's head and throat.

"Steady, there!" the captive sport sternly uttered, in warning. "If you drop a finger on me, I'll raise the whole gang!"

"And thus insure your death?" came that clear voice, with a sneer deepening its meaning. "I've come to save you, man!"

"Who are you, then?"

"A friend, if you'll permit, but—"

"I never owned a friend who didn't dare show his face to the—"

Kent Gladwin was not permitted to finish his sentence. Although his ears were strained to detect some such movement, he never knew how close that strange being had crept until a strong, firm hand closed over his lips, smothering that angry cry in its birth.

"Silence, hot-head!" hissed that voice in his ear, every syllable as distinct as though thunder-tones had been used, instead of merely breath enough to carry the words that brief distance. "I swear to you that I am a friend. I am setting you at liberty—saving you from ten-fold worse than simple death—at the risk of not only my own life, but the destruction of my most cherished plans.

"You saw me dispose of the knave who was guarding you. You ought to know that your enemy and the friend of your captors, would hardly take the trouble to play such a risky game as that. You do know it?"

With that query, the unknown removed his hand, but Gladwin instinctively felt that it hung very near, ready to act on the instant in case of anything like an outcry on his part. This helped to make his tones low and cautious, whatever his wishes might have been.

"Looks that way, I'm free to admit, stranger, but—if I had a finger on your pulse while you say it over again, maybe I'd know more!"

"Still a doubter?"

"I reckon I was born that way, stranger."

"All right. I'll waste precious little more time in argument, for I've other and more important work on hand. If I solemnly swear to lead you safely out of this wolf-den, will you agree to follow me blindly, trusting all to my judgment?"

"With hands and feet at liberty?"

"Yes or no! I've only so many minutes to lend you, and they are rapidly growing less! In one word—yes or no?"

Even yet Kent Gladwin hesitated, rapidly summing up the chances pro and con. He more than half-believed this but a cunning trick on the part of his enemies, though he failed to see what more they could expect to gain from carrying it to a conclusion.

He was already helpless in their grip. None save members of that lawless gang could ever give an explanation of his disappearance from the face of the earth. They could cut short his life, or make it a lingering death of darkness and despair.

"Time presses, I warn you again, stranger!" impatiently muttered the unknown. "Go it blind, or fare worse! Which is it to be?"

"If I say yes, you'll set me free?"

Running a hand along the prisoner's legs, the unknown deftly cut the rope about his ankles, setting his feet at liberty.

"There's your answer, sir! How do you like it?"

"First chop, as far as it reaches," quickly responded Gladwin, with an echo of grim pleasure in his tones, for this began to look more like square dealing. "Just serve my flippers the same way, and I'll tell the rest by a hug that'll remind you of your early courting days—or nights, if you like it better!"

"Can you use your legs? Can you walk?"

"Like a book!" and the sport quickly scrambled to his feet.

"Good enough! Come with me, and step as lightly as though the floor was paved with eggshells!" whispered the unknown, warm fingers gripping an arm and leading Gladwin off through the utter darkness.

For a brief space the sport yielded to this unseen guidance, but the old doubts were rapidly coming to the surface again. If this man was indeed a friend, why should he hesitate about making his work complete? Why would he not set his arms at liberty?

With Kent Gladwin reflection and action ran in couples, and he was not long in making these doubts heard, if not felt.

"Because I'm not so sure you are a friend instead of an enemy," curtly responded the unknown.

"Why are you taking even this much trouble, then? Why not leave me back yonder, wholly bound, instead of taking me here, only a half-man?"

Gladwin was growing angry, and with a man of his fiery temper, words came blunt and to the point.

"Partly because I know that in stealing you away, I'm spiting a more bitter enemy than you can possibly be. Partly to fill up a bit of time which would otherwise lie idle. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, Mr. Gladwin, you are simply a side issue. Still, you are the last man living who ought to kick at a trifle like this!"

"By which you mean—just what?"

"Business, so far as you are concerned, sir," his tones growing colder and harder. "Without the aid I am offering you, you are as good as a dead man!"

"Am I much better as matters now stand?"

"Certainly, unless you are idiot enough to kick down the ladder that offers you a way out of the grave."

"I'm no more anxious to fill a grave permanently than the next man, of course," said Gladwin, impressed, despite his suspicions, by the words and manner of his strange guide. "Still, isn't it natural for a blindfold man to crave a little light so that he may climb your ladder without risk of breaking his precious neck?"

"Is it natural for a wise man to play the fool, rather than trust to the one who is serving him at the risk of his own life?" retorted the stranger with a sneer in his tones.

It was not often that Kent Gladwin lost all control of his temper, but it must be borne in mind that he had suffered rather ignominious treatment of late, not to mention rough handling. And with his old suspicions momentarily growing stronger, it is hardly to be wondered at that he should feel inclined to revolt against this blind submission.

"I never asked for your help, stranger, nor am I so mighty sure I care for it!" he growled, sulkily, at the same time trying the strength of the cords confining his arms.

The instant he did this, the hand of his guide fell away, and from the darkness there came a significant noise which told of a ready weapon.

"You've had all you'll ever know, Mr. Gladwin, unless you tumble off that high horse, and show at least the shadow of common sense. Swear to trust and obey me blindly, to act just as I may see fit to direct, or— Will you take this oath?"

"Suppose I should decline?"

"Then I take my leave, and you may grope out of the labyrinth as best you can, with your wits as your only guide."

"You seem to forget one thing, stranger," grimly laughed Gladwin. "If I should blunder into those gentle imps, instead of finding a safe way out, how many words would it take for me to set them on your track?"

The unknown laughed, shortly, dryly.

"You'd hardly have time to sing much of a song, Mr. Gladwin; but even if you were permitted to tell all, how much would that be?"

"I could tell the head-center where I last saw Gopher Gabe!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A CHANGE OF BONDS.

KENT GLADWIN put a good deal of meaning into that brief speech, but the effect was hardly as pronounced as he must have anticipated. There was no excitement, and very little surprise in the tones of the unknown as he spoke, quietly:

"Meaning me, of course?"

"Who else? Do you deny that you are the fellow called Gopher Gabe?"

"You would not believe me if I did, so why take the trouble of denying the charge? But—time is passing, and the discovery of your escape can't be delayed much longer. When that discovery takes place, I must be in a position to take advantage of it to save a better man than either you or I."

"You don't mean—do you mean Gregory Baird?" eagerly demanded the sport, forgetting his own doubts, danger and bother in that thought.

"I do mean Gregory Baird," was the cold response.

"Let me help you! Why, man, dear! I got into this hobble just because I tried to find out what had happened to the old gentleman! I'd give a couple of fingers just for the bare chance of helping him even a little bit!"

"Yet you are surely lessening his frail hope of rescue, by your mulish obstinacy! There is only one way in which you can help him."

"Name it, man!"

"By pledging me your word of honor as a man, to obey my directions in every particular," was the swift reply.

Gladwin hesitated, rapidly weighing the matter. He could not see through the puzzle, but now that more than his own welfare hung in the balance, how could he delay? If he could only be sure that this unknown meant all he said! If he could only be sure there was no evil trickery lying back of all this mystery!

"Must I remind you again, that time is mighty precious, Mr. Gladwin?" coldly said his invisible guide.

"All right; I'll take the oath you prescribe, but with one proviso: if I find out, later, that you are playing me a dirty trick, I'll have your life or lose my own trying!"

"You are to follow my directions without other grumbling, going just where, at just what I may prescribe. You fully understand what you are promising?"

"Yes. And you understand what I mean return?"

"Yes, on my side," with a low, soft laugh, his hands sought for and found the bonds connecting Gladwin's arms. "I accept the penalty, and agree to bring my head in my hands direct to you, the instant I feel convicted of playing you dirt!"

The bonds fell off, to be secured by the unknown, and Gladwin drew a deep breath of relief as he stretched his cramped arms.

"Here's the weapons I took from Silent

Jackson. Try if the belt is long enough to buckle around you," added the stranger.

"Good enough!" chuckled Gladwin, as he accepted the arms. "You're not half such an evil imp as I began to think, a bit ago."

"All the same, you don't want to jump to the other extreme," laughed his invisible companion, all harshness of voice and manner disappearing with the winning of his main point. "I really believe I've saved your life, but I did it through no particular love for you, Mr. Gladwin. I simply hated to see an innocent man suffer on account of another man's reputation."

"Meaning Gopher Gabe? I told that fool he was barking up the wrong tree, but he didn't seem to take much stock in my veracity. Then—you are that gentleman?"

"Yes, I am the being they call Gopher Gabe," was the slow, grave response. "But you will be none the wiser for that admission, nor will you ever learn just who and what Gopher Gabe is, unless I find I can trust you thoroughly."

"Try me."

"I'd rather test you, first," came the dry retort.

"I have sworn to obey your lightest commands, so why are you—"

"That's enough on that point, Mr. Gladwin," interposed Gopher Gabe, his tone growing a bit harder. "We're losing precious time, and you are surely wise enough to realize what would be the consequence of our discovery here, inside this death-trap?"

"Salt wouldn't save us, of course!"

"That's precisely what I mean. If we are caught inside this trap, both you and I would be slaughtered without mercy by those devils."

"Not without paying a fair price for what they took, though!"

"That knowledge might be some slight consolation to our sorrowing friends, but precious little to us!" laughed Gopher Gabe. "And not only would our lives pay the forfeit, but it would be the ruin of Gregory Baird as well!"

While uttering these words, he took Gladwin by the sleeve, leading him on through the utter darkness, moving with an ease that indicated thorough knowledge of their surroundings.

Kent felt inclined to hang back a bit, but remembering that if his limbs were set at liberty it had only been a change of bonds, since his word was pledged, he answered that touch. Still, he felt almost certain that the course they were now following would lead them still further away from where Gregory Baird was confined, and despite the repulse he had so recently received, he longed to take a hand in his rescue.

"You meant what you said about setting Baird free, Gopher?" he asked, after a few moments of blind groping through the cavern.

"I certainly did," was the positive reply. "I undertook to set you free, the better to save a better man. Of course there will be a precious row kicked up when you turn up missing, and under cover of that confusion, I trust to do my work."

"You're one man, and I'm another," boldly spoke up the sport, coming to a sudden halt.

"We're both fully armed, and two such men ought to be able to sweep this wolf-den clear! Say the word, and we'll do it, too!"

In place of the response which he longed for, came a low, dry laugh, and though a hand found his in the darkness, to press it warmly, before a word was uttered Kent Gladwin knew that his hopes were in vain.

"Whatever I may be, you're the man you mention," said Gopher Gabe, his muscular fingers contracting like a clamp. "There's the ring of pure metal in your voice, and I haven't the shadow of a doubt but what you would jump at the chance of bucking against the gang, great as the odds would be; but—"

"Why not make the attempt, then? We can whip them and carry the old gentleman with us—easy!"

"Because my plans are differently laid," said Gopher Gabe, maintaining that grip, though with less vigor, and once more leading the way through the utter darkness. "I can't change them now, and you'll not make the attempt to do so. I hold your oath, remember!"

"Wish I could forget it, though!" sulkily growled the sport, the surely extravagant picture which his reckless fancy had drawn, growing more attractive as he saw it surely receding beyond his reach.

"If all you care for is the liberty of Gregory Baird, 'twill come none the less certainly, even though it may lack the accompaniments of red fire and redder gore. Now—pick up your feet a little more briskly, for the moment for action surely cannot be delayed much longer."

For several minutes longer, Kent Gladwin was led through the cavern at a rapid pace. He closed his eyes, to lessen the instinctive feeling of hidden obstacles, and without another word followed his guide until their steps brought them to the hidden door in the "dry well," through which he had been conveyed a helpless prisoner earlier on that same eventful night.

"This is one of the most sacred guarded secrets of the many connected with the Haunted Ranch," softly laughed Gopher Gabe, as a brief manipulation in the dark resulted in swinging

the heavy door open. "If the gang ever finds out you know of this, they'll spare no means in their power to forever stop your mouth—be sure of that!"

"Plenty of steps, such as they are!" muttered Gladwin, looking into and up the shaft, with its walls of flat stones, laid up without mortar. "I can climb up, if that's what you want, but—what comes after?"

He turned toward Gopher Gabe, naturally enough, but it was for the purpose of using his eyes to their utmost, hoping to utilize the faint light coming down the shaft. He could make out a form of average height, but so muffled up that he could say little as to its dimensions. He caught a gleam as of white teeth, but even of that he could not be wholly certain.

"You know where the spring is? Of course! Go there, keeping under cover as much as possible. Wait among the rock, close to the biggest one, until I can come to give further instruction. You understand?"

Before Gladwin could do more than nod assent, a faint yet unmistakable alarm came echoing through the galleries, and Gopher Gabe gave him a push inside the well, hurriedly muttering:

"Go! I can't lose a moment more! Go—and wait, as I said!"

The heavy door swung shut, leaving Gladwin imprisoned in the well.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE NEST IN AN UPROAR.

WITH that first inarticulate cry, the chief of the Black-Caps was on his feet and facing the entrance, a responsive snarl leaping to his own lips. And his right hand was drawing an ever-ready pistol from its scabbard as that nondescript figure came plunging into the cell.

It was Silent Jackson, of course, who had managed to make his way thus far from the Round Hole, but with his hairy body uncovered, his head concealed in a dingy shirt, his arms awkwardly rising above that irregular hump, desperately working for freedom, little blame could be given the chief for not instantly recognizing that valuable member of his select household.

The shrill signal of trouble brewing sounded from his lips as he swung his pistol-arm forward; but, luckily for Silent Jackson, its intended target was falling just as the weapon rose, and during the single second it took to bring the muzzle down again, the chief recognized that clumsily struggling creature.

"Cheese it, ye fool!" he snarled, leaping forward and holding that oddly hampered fellow to the rock floor with one heavily pressing foot, his gloved hands commanding the entrance through which Silent Jackson had floundered, a cocked revolver in each. "Who comes? Show cause, or I'll lay ye out—cold!"

From both right and left quarter there came the sounds of hasty footfalls, mingled with broken ejaculations and other tokens of great excitement.

The chief knew that his men were afoot, making all haste to respond to his rallying call, but he was too thoroughly on the alert now to run any wild chances. Knowing that Silent Jackson surely had not rigged himself out after that style, he was both expecting and prepared to welcome a mutual enemy.

From right and left came sounds that proclaimed his men, and then their chief called out, sternly:

"Hold both passes, lads! See that no one slips through without proving his right. There's devil's work astir, or I'm 'way off my base!"

"We've blocked the road this end, boss!" came from the right-hand passage, to be promptly echoed back from the left.

Slipping one of his revolvers back into its scabbard, the chief caught the light from its station, springing forward and making sure no game had been caught inside that human pound.

He gave a vicious snarl of disappointment, and without pausing to offer an explanation of the sudden alarm, he turned back to the rock chamber, bidding the outlaws hold the passage until he came again.

Silent Jackson was lying much as he had been left, fearing to make much of a stir or racket, after feeling the heavy foot of his master. A muffled growling, groaning, cursing all commingled, came from the folds of his heavy shirt: nothing more.

Replacing the light, Black-Cap flashed forth a knife, with which he quickly set the hampered knave at liberty, slashing at the cords with an angry haste that left both garment and wearer his debtor.

"Who did this, curse ye?" he snarled, tearing the shirt away from the head of his man, letting the light fall upon a face that anger and threatened suffocation had turned fairly purple. "Out with it, ye cur! Who trussed ye up like this? When and how?"

Silent Jackson deserved his title just at present, far more than he had at any time since it had been satirically fastened upon him. He gasped, he panted, he groined and gurgled, making sounds enough, such as they were, but

conveying precious little information to an impatient man like the one now threatening him with knife and pistol.

Here and there was a word which could be comprehended, but they were too widely disconnected to be of service. And then the furious Black-Cap set up opposition to his man: only his flood was purely blasphemous.

It was more than ought to have been asked of ordinary mortals, and what their chief might have expected, shortly took place. The knaves in the passage pressed closer to make out what all that racket was about, until they were fairly at the entrance to the chamber itself.

"Cool an' easy gits thar beapsight fu'st, boss!" came a hissing voice, and Old Snags interfered to save his partner from the brutal kicks which their leader was beginning to administer. "Killing Jacky won't onlumber his tongue, but whisky will—mebbe!"

Hardly another member of the gang would have risked such a move, but Old Snags knew that he was of entirely too great importance to the Unknown for a share of undeserved punishment to be measured out to him, and Silent Jackson was rescued from annihilation, at least for the time being.

"Swaller—pull away at the nozzle, pard!" sibilated the man of bristles, drawing cork and putting the opening thus formed "where it would do the most good!"

"Make the fool tell how came he so!" snarled the chief, choking back his hot rage as best he could, for the moment. "Make him tell what trussed him up—and how!"

"He won't want makin', boss, jest as soon's he gits his thrapple good an' greased. Ef you hedn't kicked the wind clean out o' him, reckon he'd reeled it all out a'ready!"

"He wouldn't talk—and I couldn't wait!"

"How was it, pard?" coaxingly asked Old Snags, holding the hot head of his partner across an arm. "What was ye doin' when—holy smoke!" his voice raising until it could only be likened to a whistle, his face betraying the wildest excitement, mingled with actual fear. "You didn't—Gopher Gabe didn't git the best o' ye?"

"He jumped—hit me—didn't see—" gasped Silent Jackson, only to have his head dropped from that arm to pitilessly thump the solid floor.

"Devil's work, boss!" snarled Old Snags, leaping erect and moving toward the entrance. "I left him 'long o' that p'izen critter when ye sent fer me, an' ef he's let—Quick, man!" intense anxiety completely smothering his sense of subordination. "Ef that p'izen critter gits off, we're done played!"

Catching something of that fierce anxiety, the chief pressed close upon the heels of his knave, making all practicable haste to the Round Hole, meeting several belated members of the gang, but nothing which could be accepted as an enemy.

"No light!" hissed Old Snags, as they drew near the cell to which Kent Gladwin had been consigned by the chief. "Stiddy, boss! I'll bust a match—shoot, you, ef ye ketch sight o' the p'izen critter on the loose!"

With several matches bunched and all ablaze, Old Snags entered the Round Hole, making its bareness visible to the chief as well as himself.

"Gone!" he whistled, shrilly, fairly dancing in his rage. "I knowed it—jest knowed it, all the time, fu'st (if! Gone—an' so be we, boss, ef they ain't no ketchin' of him afore he gits clean off!"

"If we can!" harshly grated his master, who had been looking for broken bonds, or something to show how that escape had been effected.

"We jest got to!" repeated Old Snags. "Think o' all he knows! Think o' his tellin' how the old gent—Holy smoke!" his peculiar voice once more rising to a shrill whistle. "Back thar, boss! Gopher Gabe's a clean devil, an' mebbe he'll be tryin' fer to run (if the old man onder kiver o' the racket! Back—I'm with ye, boss!"

After him, would have more closely fitted the mark. At that startling hint the chief wheeled and rushed at a reckless pace through the dark passage, thinking only of Gregory Baird and the possibility of losing that valuable prisoner.

He never drew a free breath until he satisfied himself that Gregory Baird was safe in bonds. If Gopher Gabe really thought to strike such an audacious blow, the presence of the excited but altogether wide awake outlaws near that chamber had foiled him thus far.

Although not many minutes had elapsed since Old Snags came to his assistance, Silent Jackson improved them to some extent. No doubt that generous application of whisky had done its part, for now he was able to talk a little more connectedly, though his explanation of what had happened him, was necessarily very vague and incomplete.

"Lvin' won't help ye, Jacky," grimly warned his mate, plainly not satisfied that the other had told the whole truth. "Didn't ye git to noddin', an' didn't that p'izen imp jump ye—honest?"

But neither threats nor coaxing could shake Silent Jackson in the story as first told. Imperfect though that was, he had told nothing but the plain truth, and to that he stuck. He had been struck down from behind, and when the

blow fell, he was watching the prisoner, getting ready to play him a harmless trick.

"I reckon ye know what *that* means, boss?" slowly hissed Snags, his tusches whetting uneasily against each other. "It means *that's* a cussed traitor 'mongst the gang! It means we've got to find all two both on 'em, or—you kin give a guess at the what, I reckon!"

The chief had been fully as anxious as Old Snags to win a clear explanation from the lips of the still bewildered guard, but now he took time to bethink himself of simple precautions which he ought to have set in motion at the very first alarm.

"Off with ye, men!" he cried, savagely. "Guard each way out, and let no one pass, whether members or not. If any one tries it, shoot him or them down as ye would a mad wolf! Go—red-hot, curse ye all!"

"Cept a couple, boss," urged Old Snags, hastily. "Keep a couple back byar, to make sure they ain't no more gittin' off o' tied-up men!"

His master accepted this amendment, and Dick Roper, with Goggles for mate, were hastily called back to the chamber.

"You surely can't think Gopher Gabe—if that fellow was Gopher Gabe—would try any such desperate trick as setting *him* free?" asked the chief of the Black-Caps, flashing a vicious glance toward Gregory Baird, who had made no move or uttered a word since that uproar first broke forth, but who was making the utmost possible use of both eyes and ears while it lasted.

"Nur yit I didn't think o' sech a thing as his bu'stin' loose while S. J. was guardin' of him, nuther!" hissed the veteran, turning toward his partner with a glare of angry doubt and growing suspicion in his eyes. "How came ye to manidge it, anyway, dug-gun ye?"

"Hain't I bin tellin' of ye, double times over?" sulkily growled Silent Jackson, squatting near the wall, both hands clasping his aching head.

Although he was rallying from that heavy shock, he was just beginning to experience the sort of a headache which nothing can intensify greater than a doltily-handled sand club.

"Ye've bin tellin' at it, yes, but—durned of my thrapple's big 'nough fer to swaller everything! What fer made ye so mighty eager to stan' guard over that pizen critter in my place? Why was it ye tuck the trouble to say I didn't need fer to come back, when the boss got done wantin' of me? Eh? Why? Kin ye 'splain all that, S. J.?"

Their master was silently chafing, longing for an object on which he could expend at least a portion of his pent-up passions, all the more venomous because he knew not where to look for a vent. He found it now, and catching a part of the suspicions which evidently inspired that angry hiss, he half-crouched over the miserable wretch, snarling:

"You've got drunk while on duty, and let that devil fool ye! I'll cut your hide to ribbons, an' feed the strips to ye by the yard, if we fail to catch the game your folly let slip!"

Silent Jackson shivered before that savage glare, but the very extent of his peril lent him pluck and fluency. Once more he told his story, and though he was forced to admit that he had neither seen nor heard aught suspicious up to the second that awful blow was given him, neither the chief nor Old Snags could longer suspect him of anything more criminal than carelessness while on important duty.

"What do you make out of it, Snags?" at length asked the chief.

"What *kin* I make out o' it? One o' the gang's sold us out!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I KNOW WHO GOPHER GABE IS!"

THOSE words came with dogged reluctance, but that fact only lent them an added weight.

It was a truly bitter pill to swallow, but there was no alternative in sight. Granting that Silent Jackson had spoken the truth, Kent Baldwin surely had assistance in escaping his bonds.

"An' sence nobody but the reg'lar gang's bin inside this night, that means one o' the gang knocked S. J. silly. But—*who* was it?"

There was no answer forthcoming, and still clinging to hope—still trying to believe that, despite his apparent sincerity in declaring that he had not fallen into a doze, during which Kent Baldwin managed to free his hands from bonds, without outside assistance—the chief bade all but the two men detailed to watch over the entry of Gregory Baird, strike out and, first making sure that no one had been captured while endeavoring to pass those watching the different exits, help to thoroughly explore the cavern with all its cells and passages, setting the example himself.

"Do your best effort to catch the pizen critter up 'em, S. J.," hissed Old Snags as they left the cell. "Ef ye don't—ef he hain't ketcht by some o' the gang—mebbe the boss won't let ye off so dug-gun only the next time!"

When it was learned that no attempt had been made by any person to leave the cavern since the guards were stationed, the chief bade all their number ascend and look for game on

the outside, then set the rest to work thoroughly exploring the cavern itself.

Although so much valuable time had been lost before that first bewildered surprise wore off, everything was carried out with cool, cautious system, from this moment on. The search began at the end of the retreat directly under the Uncanny Ranch, and then pushed on with a certainty of ultimate discovery, in case the escaped or rescued prisoner had not actually fled from the cavern.

All this consumed considerable time, for the cavern was extensive, and the possible hiding-places numerous. Still, what was worth doing at all, was worth doing thoroughly, and the chief kept his men briskly at work while even the ghost of a chance remained of making the longed-for discovery.

Their quest was in vain. No one was found who had not only the freedom of the place, by virtue of his connection with the family. And, kept from savage despair only by the vague hope that some of those searching above ground might have met with better success, the chief at length abandoned the search.

The hour was growing late, and he had his reasons for not letting the dawn of day catch him in that neighborhood, but he lingered long enough to question each one of his men who had returned from above.

Their answer was always the same: nothing had been seen or heard of the recent captive. Not one could report having found even the slightest thread of a clew to act upon.

The chief rapidly "took stock" of his men, and his dark eyes caught a still keener glitter, while his gloved hands closed as with sudden anger. All but two or three of the band was accounted for, but among those missing was Silent Jackson!

"Where is he? Who saw him last—and where?" harshly demanded the head of the outlaws.

"He went outside, but jest whar, I didn't ketch on," ventured one of the band, after a brief hesitation.

The chief gave an angry, suspicious start. His old doubts concerning the luckless guard flashed into life again.

"Find him, if you can. And when found, see that he don't step outside until I come again," he added, harshly, at the same time feeling more than half sure Silent Jackson had run away for good and all.

If Old Snags had thought it wise or prudent to mention the parting caution he had given his gaunt partner, that doubt would have turned to certainty; but that worthy knew enough not to make a bad matter worse by foolishly trying to better it, and kept his own counsel.

The chief touched him on an arm as he moved away, and rightly interpreting that as a signal to bear him company, Old Snags followed close at his heels until they both stood at the "lift" by means of which the chief had entered the cavern that evening.

Easily working this, by means of ropes, the two outlaws ascended through the darkness, passing through a secret trap-door located under the heavy stone base of the huge fire-place. From this contracted spot, they crept along a few yards through the darkness, then gained the outer air by passing through the unnailed bottom of a manger, partly filled with dusty hay which had been lying there for many months.

Pausing only long enough to take a cautious look around, making sure no unfriendly eyes were watching their movements, they passed out of the tumble-down stable, pausing where the shadows lay darkest.

"I wanted to say a word or two where there was no danger of being overheard by any of the men, old fellow," began the chief, in confidential tones. "I know I can trust you—*can't* I?"

Never until now had he betrayed any doubt as to the complete fidelity of this henchman, but the events of that night had weakened his faith in all save himself, and Old Snags was sharp enough to detect as much.

"Gi' me your hand, boss," he said, reaching forth his own. "No; let it be skin to skin, fer I want ye to feel as well as hear what I say. So!" tightening his grip on that bared member.

"I ain't much of a critter fer slobberin', boss, but *this* much I will say, right now: No matter what sort o' work you hev, no matter what sort o' trouble you git into, I'll stick to you through thick an' thin. An' ef I ever hev the chance, an' cain't do it no cheaper, I'll give my life to save yours! Thar—I've said it, an' that's a oath!"

While speaking, his ugly face was turned so that the faint light fell upon it. And gazing into that face, looking into those eyes, hearing that voice as they stood with clasped hands, the chief knew that Old Snags meant every word he uttered. Just as surely as that time ever came 'round—just so surely as he was threatened with death by bullet or steel—just so surely would Old Snags save his life at the expense of his own, if no less heroic means were offered.

"I'll never forget for this, old fellow," huskily muttered the masked outlaw, wringing his hand. "But—time presses, and I must be taking the

saddle. First—I want to leave the old gent in your care until I can come again. Watch over and guard him as you would a pile of gold, for there's big money in it—*big money*, old fellow!"

"I'll keep all two both eyes onto the critter, boss."

"Do so. Be sure, you'll not lose anything by helping me out. If I can bring it off as I've laid the ropes, there's a snug little fortune with your name printed on it, waiting for—"

"Stiddy, boss!" sharply hissed Old Snags, at that juncture, one hand seeking a revolver-butt as his keen, ever restless eyes caught sight of an indistinct figure hurrying in that direction.

"Down him for keeps, if it's that infernal—"

"No sech good luck!" sibilated Old Snags, letting his pent-up breath free as his sharp eyes recognized one of the band. "It's Pete Miggles, I do reckon! He's one o' them as went out fer to take a hunt a'ter—*Stiddy, pard!*" with a warning hiss, as the fellow came to an abrupt stop on catching a glimpse of their shadowy forms.

"That you, Snags?"

"That's me. What ye want, Pete! What's kept ye so long?"

"The durndest lookin' sight!" huskily replied the fellow, peering curiously, or doubtfully, at that second figure. "Who's with ye, man?"

"I am," answered the well-known voice of the chief. "What have you discovered? Anything of the runaway?"

"Some o' his work, I reckon, boss," with a perceptible shiver in his tones. "It's a dead man—Silent Jackson, no less!"

Both of his hearers gave short ejaculations of angry wonder, and under their eager questions, Miggles quickly told his story. It did not take long, for he knew they wanted only the material portions.

He had stumbled upon the ghastly find, purely by accident, while searching near the spring for the fugitive. And leading them direct to the spot, he silently pointed to the ugly find.

"I never techt it, boss, more'n to make sure who 'twas," he said, in gloomy, awe-struck tones as the others bent closer over the body.

It was only too surely poor Jackson, already growing cold in death.

No need to ask how he had met his death. Dim though the light was, all could see the haft of a knife rising above his breast, the blade of which must have met his heart's center.

"Look!" ejaculated the chief, pointing at that weapon. "Isn't that a bit of paper on the handle?"

To make sure, he struck a match, then took from the haft a square of paper, kept from the oozing blood by the guard between the blade and hilt. And by that flickering light, they noted a boldly written figure three, with the initials "G. G." just beneath. And then Old Snags hissed:

"Now I know who Gopher Gabe is! Pore S. J.! He's ketcht you up, an' I reckon it'll come my turn next!"

CHAPTER XXV.

OLD SNAGS WANTS TO SKIP OUT.

THERE was a peculiar blending of fierce rage, deadly hatred and gloomy fear in this outbreak, which served to startle the chief of the black-heads almost as much as had the discovery and recognition of the unfortunate fellow on whose head he had so lately been showering hot curses for his supposed infidelity.

There was the same unpleasant hissing sound to the words, for it was a physical impossibility, with those tusches, to speak without that; but in all else Old Snags seemed altered, for the worse.

"Who is he, then?" grated the chief, one hand clutching the old man by an arm, the other gripping those grim trophies. "Who is Gopher Gabe?"

That fiercely eager question served to recall Old Snags to himself, and noting how curiously Miggles was leaning toward them, he hissed:

"We shor'ly cain't leave pore S. J. to lay out byar, boss? Ef he was to be diskivered by anybody else—an' I reckon the gang from the Squar' Ring'll be mighty li'ble to sashay over this way ag'in in the mornin'—mebbe thar'd be sharper p'intin' o' noses then we'd git eyther fat or rich over!"

Despite the repeated shocks which he had received of late, the head of the gang was cool enough to rightly interpret that abrupt change of both manner and subject.

"You're right, Snags. Poor Jackson deserves the best we can do for him, so—Miggles!"

"On hand, boss!"

"Carry the news to the boys, and fetch back three stout fellows with you. Only three, you understand?"

"Kin I tell t'others you said fer 'em to hold back?" hesitated the outlaw. "Ef I didn't hev some sech hitch onto 'em, an' they was to l'arn as how pore S. J. hed come to—"

"Tell all but the three men you select to help bear S. J. back to the nest, that I order them to keep their stations. Go, now, or the sun will catch you with the job incomplete!"

Miggles skurried away, for few of that reckless gang dared to linger when the chief said hasten.

Old Snags stole noiselessly after him, only re-

laxing his unusual precautions when he could no longer doubt that his fellow was making all haste direct to the "dry well."

"Now then, out with it, man!" impatiently growled his master, when the man of bristles came back once more. "You say you know who Gopher Gabe is: Who is he, then?"

"A devil on ten wheels—never a less!" shivered the old man nervously playing with the weapons at his middle, casting a keen, apprehensive look around them, like one who more than half expects to catch sight of a terrible enemy in the very act of leaping upon him.

"You know him, then?"

"Not so well as I reckon I'll hev to!" with a gloomy, prophetic glance at the corpse of his partner. "But—yes, I know him!"

"How comes it that you couldn't be dead sure when you had him right under your grip, down in the nest?"

There was an ugly echo to those tones, and something almost like suspicion in the close watch which the chief was keeping upon the dimly visible face of his henchman: but Old Snags paid no attention to either.

"Ef I only *did* hev!" he hissed, flinging out his hands to close his sinewy fingers about the imaginary throat of his enemy, shaking it as he might have done with the original. "Ef I *had* only had *him* whar you say, boss!"

"But you did! Even then, didn't you swear that he was Gopher Gabe?"

Old Snags dropped his clinched hand, staring dully, almost vacantly into that cowed face for a few moments. Then, as the truth flashed upon him, an ugly, snake-like sound escaped his lips; as nearly a laugh as those inconvenient tushes would permit.

"You're p'intin' at that pesky critter we ketchin' in the ranch, I reckon, boss?"

"The one who called himself Kent Gladwin, of course," with a growl of fierce impatience. "This is *his* work, curse him!"

"Mebbe he *did* stick S. J., but ef he did, 'twasn't *him* as polished the job up so slick," slowly nodded the veteran, gingerly touching the bit of paper which his master still held in his gloved hand. "He never made that figger, nor writ them letters."

"Who did, then? Speak out, can't you? You swore he was Gopher Gabe, only a little bit ago, but now—"

"Now I say he ain't Gopher Gabe, beca'se I know better. An' I know better, beca'se he ain't nigh old 'nough fer to be the one as knows Silent Jackson makes up three good lads—solid pards, each an' every one of 'em! Beca'se the one as *did* know, an' *do*, an' hev mighty good cause fer both knowin' an' doin' of it, ain't no nigher bein' like Kent Gladwin in face, shape nor figger, then I'm like you, boss!"

Even one so suspicious by nature as was the chief of the Black-Caps could not help seeing how thoroughly in earnest this man was. He had surely received some great shock to thus unsettle his nerves. He who was customarily so cool, so reckless, so ready of both tongue and wit, was shivering, nervous, glancing hither and yon, turning with a start at the slightest sound, his hands now fumbling with the weapons at his girdle, then plucking sharply at his bristling beard.

Surely Gopher Gabe must be a terrible enemy, for the mere possibility of his being close at hand to so shake this dare-devil!

"I believe Kent Gladwin did the trick," positively asserted the chief, after a brief silence. "He caught the cue from your charging him with being Gopher Gabe, and—"

"Don't that paper say number three, boss?" hissed Old Snags, tapping the white square with the extreme tip of a finger, then drawing his hand back, much as though he had attempted to stroke the head of a sleeping viper.

"A clumsy trick to make the mystery seem deeper—no more!"

"Then I reckon 'twas a clumsy trick that set a figger one onto the karkidge o' pore Dan Dement? An' 'twas 'nother empty joke that writ a figger *two* 'bove the cold heart o' Jack Ingalls, when he was found layin' out, stiff an' cold, a'ter the big—"

Old Snags broke off abruptly, for his sharp ears caught the sounds of approaching foot-falls, and a single look told him that Miggles had carried the startling tidings to the nest, and was returning with help to convey the corpse to their retreat.

"Button up! I cain't let on afore the pack o' them!" hastily hissed Snags, stepping forth from the shadow of the rocky mass, and signaling the outlaws to come on.

They were provided with means for shaping a rude litter, and when the corpse was safely placed upon this, their chief bade them carry their ghastly burden back to the nest, stowing it safely away in one of the unused chambers, until he could call again.

"We'll remove what few traces are left," he said, motioning them away. "The Square Ring gang'll be snooping about here as soon as day comes, and they mustn't be let catch a clew. Keep on your guard, all the time, and only work the spooks if nothing less can save you. Go, now!"

Old Snags was already at work, covering up

the few blood-marks which were to be seen. Fortunately for them, the wound—thanks to its being plugged by the deadly weapon—had bled little outwardly.

The chief watched him for a brief space in silence, but then his fierce impatience got the upper hand, and he growled forth:

"Come, old fellow! I can't afford to wait much longer, or I'll be like a red fox caught out too late! Leave the rest for a better light. You can slip down here when dawn comes. Out with the rest about this infernal Gopher Gabe of yours!"

"Ever hear tell of a man named Waldo Bainbridge?"

"Never until this moment. What has he got to do with Gopher Gabe?"

"He is Gopher Gabe, though I never knowed as much ontel I see what them letters was, jest now!"

"You saw the same letters before; why didn't you see as much then, as you think you see now?"

"Beca'se they wasn't jined onto a figger three, like this! Beca'se they hedn't nary p'int 'bout 'em that could mak' me ketch the idee they hed ort to do with the black—fer it *was* a mighty black bit o' work, as I'm free to own up, now!"

"Brace up, man!" almost fiercely snarled his master, a hand going out to grip and give Old Snags a vigorous shake. "I'd think you were drunk or clean crazy, if you hadn't proved different, just before this nasty bit of work! Shake your wits together, and come down to solid business. What is Gopher Gabe? Why did he mark S. J. as number three? Why do you say that it may come your turn next?"

"Never you mind 'bout jest the when, or whar, or whyfore, boss," Old Snags spoke, with an evident struggle regaining something like his usual steadiness. "Mebbe I'll give ye all the p'ticklars, when I sorter overcome the jar this findin' hes giv' me. But jest now—let it go that one time we—five of us in the outfit—got on a stampede that fetched up in a gob o' mighty black doin's!"

"Thar was a woman mixed up in it; an' thar was a kid or two. I ain't plum' sure on all p'int's, even yet, fer we was chuck up an' runnin' over 'th bug-juice, you see!"

"The family of this man—what did you call him?"

"Waldo Bainbridge, boss. I didn't know much 'bout him, then. I've got a mighty sight wiser sence, though!" with a hard, hissing laugh. "I own up blunt that we giv' him a most nasty tough deal, fer a fact! An' when I knowed that he'd camped on our trail—you know what that sayin' means, boss?"

"I know; go on!" impatiently.

"Fu'st he hit pore Dan. Then he rounded up Jack Ingalls. Now—waal, you see how he done up pore S. J. An' that leaves jest two out o' the five that done that job! Dick Roper, down yender, an' me! An' when I come to reckon it all up, I— Say, boss!" with an abrupt change of tone and manner, "I'm growin' powerful weak into the knees o' me! When I stop to think how that p'izen critter must 'a' bin swarmin' all 'round us an' through the nest, this very night, it gives me the creeps, most mighty bad! An'—ef you'll hear to me, boss, you'll squeeze what ye kin out o' the old gent in a hurry, then keep me comp'ny in 'lightin' out fer safer pastures!"

A savage curse broke from the masked lips of his master.

"Skip nothing! I'll play this game through if I have to go it all alone! I've spent far too much time and trouble to make a fizzle now! Have you turned cur in your old age, Snags?"

"But—sence he 'pears to know so mighty much 'bout the nest, an' the ways fer gittin' in an' gittin' out, boss, what's to hinder his jumpin' down onto our backs, with a bull gang to help round us up?"

"The same reasons which have led him to hold back his hand this long," was the swift retort. "He couldn't have learned it all this one night, Snags. If he meant to sweep us all, why be content with just taking a single man?"

"Mebbe he wants to make up the clean five, fu'st," suggested the old sinner, forcing a sickly grin.

"Then all you have to do is to keep sharply on your guard that he can't come it, old fellow," chuckled his master. "And by so doing, you may get a chance to block the whole business—see?"

"You mean—"

"Kill both Kent Gladwin and this Gopher Gabe, old man, and I'll make it a clean ten thousand ducats for you, the minute I pull my same off!"

"Ef I git a chaince, boss, 'twon't be the money as'll make me hit or shoot mighty straight to the mark—be sure!"

"Well, I must pull out. Bear in mind, I trust the old gentleman to your guardianship. Hold your grip on him, no matter what else may break loose, and don't forget that in working for me, you are working for your own interests. Now—I'm off! I'll try to drop in again to-

night, but that depends on how—on circumstances."

With those words, the chief glided off after his horse.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ACROSS THE BLOODY CHASM.

WHEN Fred Dingley, the city marshal of Longhorn, after being heard in the office of the Gilsey House, asking for Victor Baird and Oscar Finley, made his appearance in the doorway leading into the parlor where the trio were engaged in conversation, he was at once confronted by young Finley, whose face was as stern as his voice was hard:

"What is your business with us, Mr. Dingley? I gave bail for this gentleman, and surely you are not going to say that's not good?"

A faint smile came into the rugged face of the official, but the hand which he lifted was unarmed and open.

"I'm not coming to arrest anybody, Finley," he said, then doffing his slouch hat with a bow toward the frightened Flora. "Your word is plenty good enough bond for me, even if Hardin Peck—"

"Did he send you here, then?"

Possibly it was because Finley felt a very natural desire to "loom up" before the bright eyes of the fair maiden whose sweet face had made such a powerful impression on his heart; or it might have been that he wished to spare her some painful shock, through cutting short the blunt-speaking marshal. Be that as it may, neither his tone nor his manner were calculated to increase the love which Dingley felt for the man who had so publicly defied him only a short time before.

"You touch lightly, young man," coldly spoke the marshal, standing his ground, one hand dropping closer to his belt of arms. "My business here isn't so much with you, as with yonder gent, and—"

"I've made his cause mine, marshal, and having gone his bail, you can't lay the tip of a finger on him without a regular warrant."

"If you'll be so good as to simmer, Finley, you'll see that you're scaring the young lady heap sight worse than anything I've got to say or do," laughed the officer, a bit spitefully.

"Do you want me, sir?" demanded Victor, rising to his feet.

"Not as a prisoner, my dear sir," promptly responded Dingley. "I simply come to beg of you a favor for a poor devil who thinks—I'm not so sure he isn't fooled, though!"

"Just what do you want, then?" frowned Finley.

"It isn't me, so much as Peck. He reckons he's in a fair way to cash in his checks, but he don't want to jump the game without squaring up all accounts. So—he owns up to having been in the wrong, and begged me to fetch you two gents, so he could say as much to you both."

"Honest, Dingley?"

"On my word as a white man—honest!"

"It's all right, Miss Baird," hastily whispered Finley, turning to Flora, who stood pale and frightened, she hardly knew at what. "Dingley never broke his word, after passing it as man to man. I'll bring your brother back to you, just as safe and sound as I took him away."

"You are sure? It is such a dreadful affair, that—"

"This will end it, Miss Baird, and end it most happily, too! Your brother will come out of the affair with flying colors, and there'll be no further trouble kicked up over it. Surely you can trust me?"

If Oscar was foolish enough to hope for a public reward in return for his services, past and prospective, he was fated to be disappointed.

Flora hardly noted his impressive whisper, for Victor, who had been interchanging a few words with the marshal, now turned toward his sister, and she hastened at once to his arms.

"It's all right, little girl," he gave assurance.

"It's best that I go, for that will clear away all future bother. And I'll not be gone long, you know."

"I'll bring him back, be sure, Miss Baird," chimed in Finley.

Although she was wholly unaccustomed to such harsh events, Flora came of good stock, and when convinced that all was being done for the best, she yielded, kissing Victor, and even permitting Oscar to wring her hand with kindly ardor.

Marshal Dingley led the two young men outside the hotel before revealing aught further, but when they were free from risk of being overheard by other ears, he spoke up:

"As I told you, gents, Peck reckons he's had the last turn called on him, and he wants to square up while the light holds out. See?"

"I trust it is not so bad as that," a bit unsteadily said Victor.

He was brave as the majority, and when cornered could fight as hard and as viciously as the best; but he was too young not to shiver at the thought of having caused the death of another, even though that other richly deserved all he got.

Lightly as the matter is too often treated, 'tis an awful thought, this knowing one has a human life upon his hands!

"Well, when you see and hear him, I reckon you'll say there isn't much show for his pulling through, though I *did* drop a hint in there, just to easy it up for the young lady, that he might be foolishing himself," slowly uttered the marshal, as they moved briskly forward.

"You are not trying a double trick, are you, Dingley?" demanded Finley, his voice hardening with that suspicion. "This isn't meant to end in an arrest?"

"No, sir! I gave you my word, and that is my bond. When Peck has said his say, you can both go where you will, for all of me!"

There was no further talk until after the room was gained, where the wounded gambler lay, white and death-like, awaiting their coming.

A physician was in attendance, and there were a few of his more intimate friends collected. These, however, were bidden leave by Peck himself, in low, husky tones:

When the room was cleared of all save the marshal, the doctor, and the two young men, Peck motioned for them to draw closer about his cot, then signed for a drink. Very gravely the physician complied, and the wounded gambler spoke, in slightly stronger tones:

"I wanted to say—to ask your pardon—both, gentlemen."

"You certainly have mine," spoke up Victor Baird, gently clasping his hand as it lay outside the sheet. "I'm sorry I hit you so hard, but—there wasn't much time to calculate—you understand?"

It was far from what he wanted to say, and Victor flushed with embarrassment as he caught that faint smile stealing into the pale face of the man whom his hand had laid low.

"I know. Neither did I count—on being hit—so hard!" the injured man gasped, evidently amused, though feeling himself at the point of death.

But he was gradually rallying, no doubt from the effects of that last stimulating draught, and though his words came in snatches—too greatly disconnected to make easy reading—he found no particular difficulty in making his meaning perfectly clear.

He seemed bent on making a clean breast of it, and though, more than once, he must have noticed the dark frown which gathered the brows of Oscar Finley at mention of his sister, Peck persisted until all was said.

He told how he had fallen in love with pretty Mabel Finley, and how he pressed his suit with all the ardor of his fiery, untamed nature, at every possible opportunity. Only to be positively declined as lover or as husband.

It cut him deep; he openly admitted as much; and when, that evening, he chanced to meet Mabel, the devil got the better of him.

He tried to conceal nothing. He admitted that he received no more than he deserved at the hands of Victor Baird. But still he thirsted for revenge, and forcing Jack Delaney to join him, he watched for and assaulted Baird, after leaving the Finley place.

He said that he meant to kill the man who had marked his face, and acknowledging that he had been justly rewarded, once more begged them both to forgive him; Victor for his wound, Oscar for the vile insults forced upon his sister.

"I've lived a brute—let me die a white man!" he concluded.

Victor at once expressed his full and hearty pardon, with a suspicious moisture in his eyes as he clasped that nerveless hand once again. If he could have undone the work his too sure aim had wrought, just then it seemed to him no sacrifice would be too great.

Oscar was less impulsive. His nature was different, his temper was harder as well as hotter. He loved his sister as the apple of his eye, and those wrongs were very hard to overlook.

Still, he yielded, at length, and as their hands parted, after a brief grip, Hardin Peck closed his lids, with a faint sigh of satisfaction.

The marshal and doctor hurried the young men outside the chamber, but when safely beyond earshot of the wounded man, their grave looks vanished, and broad smiles, took the place of them.

Oscar Finley noted this, and a suspicion of the truth flashed upon his active brain.

"You're up to some dodge, you two: what is it?" he asked, sternly.

"If a fraud, it's a pious one, at any rate," laughed the doctor. "And Peck don't know it, mind! He thinks he's dying, but I'll have him on his feet inside a month, if he follows my orders!"

"Too late, Oscar!" laughed Dingley, as Finley turned toward the chamber. "You've forgiven him, and you're never the man to go back on a bargain to which you've given your hand! Make the best of it, lad!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

RIDING TO THEIR FATE.

VICTOR BAIRD laughed, just nervous enough after what he had passed through, to fully appreciate such a jest; but not so his new friend.

It had come hard enough to utter words of forgiveness, and clasp hands in amity with a man whom he hated as bitterly as he hated Hardin Peck, under the firm belief and positive

assurance that the gambler was lying on a repentant death-bed. Now, to learn that he had been cozened into doing all this, and that the offender himself was in all probability laughing over his credulous magnanimity—it was entirely too bitter a pill to swallow.

"Out of the way, both o' ye!" he cried, hotly. "I'll go eat my words, kick that cowardly trickster out of town, then—I'll look you gentlemen up, to answer for *your* part in this dirty business!"

"Steady, friend!" cried Victor, quickly interposing, thus giving the others time to explain a little more fully.

The doctor earnestly declared that Hardin Peck actually believed that the wounds he had received would result in his speedy death, and that never a man was more sincere than he, in begging to receive their forgiveness while breath was granted him.

"It was a mighty close call, Mr. Finley, and there is a chance that I may be mistaken in my belief that I can and will pull him safely through. That turn for the worse may come at any minute, and if it ever *does* come, his light will go out just as you blow out a candle!"

"Hardin knows that much," supplemented the marshal, only his eyes betraying how greatly he enjoyed the situation. "If we'd told him all, and he'd known there was even a chance for his life, he'd have been ashamed to send for you, and as a natural consequence we would have wound up with a street fight at some future day with you two as principals. As it is, the old trouble need never be raked up again."

"It was my affair, not yours, Fred Dingley. What right had you to chip in? Why should you lie about—"

"Touch lightly, Mr. Finley," curtly interrupted the marshal. "I did not lie to you. At the outside, I simply hell back a bit of the truth."

"You made me believe Peck was dying!"

"I told you *he* thought so. I meant to have told you *we* looked at it in a different light; but—well, when you ruffled up so mighty brash, back at the Gilsey House, I reckoned it wouldn't do any particular hurt if your comb *should* get nipped a little."

Once more both Victor and the doctor interfered, and between them they succeeded in making the hot-tempered young man comprehend that it was far the wisest plan to drop the matter right where it stood.

He had acted magnanimously in setting at ease the troubled mind of an enemy who had no thoughts of surviving. The story would spread no further, if he accepted the situation.

"But if you persist in playing the ass, young gentleman," bluntly declared the doctor, scowling ferociously, "I'll publish the joke broadcast, and if you challenge me, will name *my* store as the ground, *its* stock the weapons, and we'll flip a dollar to see which one shall pick a bottle to give the first dose! I will, 'pon honor!"

But it was Victor Baird who completed the victory, and he did it by reminding Oscar that Flora would be growing alarmed by their prolonged absence. The memory of that fair, sweet face soothed his ruffled temper, and the really good-hearted young fellow gave way.

"Let it go, then, gentlemen; but don't flatter Peck with the notion that I'll fall about his neck with both arms and slobber all over him, the first time I meet him on the street!"

The young men returned to the Gilsey House, both feeling decidedly better for what they had done. After all, the gambler had made what reparation lay in his power, and though he might not become a saint in consequence, he would hardly act as brutally toward the same persons again.

Flora's fears were quickly set to rest, and when Oscar saw how genuinely pleased she was at the full reconciliation, he lost the last sting of anger toward those who had so neatly tricked him.

No word from Gregory Baird had come, and at that late hour, there was little probability of either seeing or hearing from him that night.

"If you would like, I'll take a run over to the Harpe Ranch in the morning, with word that you are waiting in town," suggested Finley.

"How far did you say the place is from here?"

"About forty miles. But that's merely a trifle out in this land of magnificent distances, Miss Baird," laughed Oscar, as Flora gave a faint exclamation of dismay. "I can make the round trip to-morrow, and have your father here to help you eat supper, easy enough."

"But—I was thinking we might—is it too far for me to ride, Victor?" hesitated Flora, looking almost appealingly to her brother.

"Entirely too far, since you are out of practice, sis. I'd try it on, if I thought this shoulder wouldn't bother more than it does now."

Victor gave a wry grimace as he swung his wounded member freely. Though the hurt promised to heal rapidly, it left him in rather poor condition for a long trip in the saddle, particularly with such half-wild horses as he might expect to have to select from.

Meanwhile Oscar was racking his brain to some purpose, for at this he eagerly spoke up:

"How would it do to drive over to the Square Ring?"

"Can we get a vehicle of any description?"

"I have a light spring wagon which I keep mainly for hunting purposes, and a good span of ponies. No doubt you'll think you've seen neater-looking turnouts, Miss Baird, but I assure you that, if you'll permit me to drive you both over to see your father in the morning, you'll say it's really an improvement on the stage you came here in!"

After a little further talk, during which Oscar managed to make both brother and sister believe they would be conferring a favor on him by permitting him to drive them over, instead of their falling too deeply into his debt, good-nights were said, and they separated with the understanding that, in case Gregory Baird should not make his appearance before ten o'clock the next day, or word failed to reach them of a nature making such a trip out of the question, Finley should drive them over to the Square Ring Ranch, as the shortest method of setting their anxieties at rest.

While waiting for the appointed hour, after breakfast, Victor called to ask how Hardin Peck was progressing, and when the doctor assured him that everything looked favorable for a speedy recovery, the young man felt amply repaid for his trouble.

A ruffian had been sharply punished, and the lesson read him might result in a change for the better.

So punctual that he was a good quarter of an hour ahead of the time set, Oscar Finley drove up to the Gilsey House. Although the two-seated spring wagon showed a lack of paint and varnish, both it and the spirited span of ponies might have told a tale of unusual care and brushing up on their master's part, had any one known just how to question them.

When his eager query as to whether Mr. Gregory had arrived since he left Victor, was answered in the negative, Finley tried hard to show regret to match the uneasiness which his new friend clearly felt; but the increased sparkle in his dark eyes betrayed his real pleasure.

Of course he was not in love with Flora Baird. More than a score of times he had told himself as much in plain, positive terms. But—well, it was a lovely day for a brisk drive over the prairie, and his ponies needed the exercise!

Their host suggested putting up a lunch for his guests, but kind Mrs. Finley had forestalled him in that direction, and he was forced to content himself with wishing them good luck—and a speedy return!

Surely, never was there a more willing pair of ponies than these! And forlorn strangers never before had such a jolly, accommodating, intelligent Jehu provided for their especial benefit, without trouble on their part or cost to their purse.

Nothing occurred to mar the nearly perfect pleasure of the first half of their long drive. The day was clear and warm, yet not too warm for comfort. The road was good—for where what answered for a road did not fully suit Finley, all he had to do was to veer off to one side or the other, and they went smoothly bowling across the grassy carpet.

At the noon hour, or a little later, a halt was made for lunch and to "rest the dear ponies," as Flora would have it. Finley gravely accepted that amendment, though he would surely have laughed in the face of any other person, for their poor judgment of horseflesh.

As neither brother nor sister thought of returning that day, fully counting on finding their father at the Square Ring Ranch, no great haste was made over lunch, or after the willing ponies had carried them to where the first glimpse of a lone building in the far distance could be caught.

As this building bore the reputation of being "haunted," Finley was afforded fresh matter for chatter, and being shrewd enough to see that, like the majority of her sex, Flora felt a strong interest in matters spiritual, he laid himself out to thrill without actually frightening his fair passenger.

It is barely possible that he drew a little on his imagination for his facts, though there was hardly any occasion for that. Whether fact or fiction, an abundance of wild, romantic and even blood-curdling rumors were afloat concerning that uncanny structure.

"Don't you think a sheriff and his posse, duly prepared for a keen search, could pretty effectually lay those spooks?" dryly asked Victor.

"Not all of them," was the slow response, as Finley suddenly grew grave, a troubled look coming into his eyes as he touched up the ponies. "I formed one of a half a dozen wild lads, who set out to spend an entire night beneath that roof, about a year ago. But—we left before the sun rose!"

"Driven away by—ghosts?" laughed Baird.

"Thrown out, neck and baggage by—I'll never tell you *just what*, for I'm in doubt up to the present moment," quietly responded Finley.

It was so evident that the subject was a disagreeable one to him, that Victor dropped it at that point, though Oscar promised to enter a little more fully into details at another time.

As they were passing within a mile or so of the Haunted Ranch, Flora called attention to an ugly, threatening cloud hanging over the rugged hills to the northwest, but Finley assured her that, long before the promised storm could work

that far, they would be safely housed at Square Ring Ranch.

"The river runs through the canyon yonder, where you see the two trees," pointing with his whip in the direction his ponies were heading. "After crossing that, we have only a couple or three miles to cover, and we'll make that in lively time."

"It looks like a heavy storm, and I'm such a coward— Oh!"

Flora broke off with a studder as a brilliant flash of lightning rent the black mass, and clapped both hands to her ears to shut out the following clap of thunder, but which proved little more than a dull, sullen rumble.

"That ought to reassure you, Miss Baird," laughed Finley, though he touched up his ponies, sending them forward at a rattling gait.

A short space of time brought them to the top of the steep, narrow cut leading down into the canyon, and pausing only long enough to give the regulation warning shout to any possible travelers coming from the other side, Oscar began the descent, jamming the brake hard down.

They were nearly down to the water, when a strange, dull roaring sound startled them all: loud enough for thunder, but of an altogether different nature.

"What is it, Finley?" cried Victor, alarmed by the fierce oath which unwittingly burst through Oscar's clinched jaws. "Thunder?"

"Worse—a cloud-burst! Hold on—hard! For your lives!"

It was impossible to turn back, and though it was almost like running straight into the jaws of death, Finley lashed his team forward.

The ponies leaped ahead as the brake was kicked back, and entered the water with a mighty splash. Then—striking an unseen rock, the forward axle gave way.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LIKE STRAWS IN A WHIRLPOOL.

THE crash was so wholly unexpected, that all was thrown into the utmost confusion.

Finley was flung forward, his head striking one of the ponies, breaking it down with the heavy shock. Victor was a little better prepared, since he and Flora occupied the back seat, and were holding on with both hands; but he, too, was flung forward against the dashboard when that sudden shock came.

And, with its awful roaring increased tenfold even during those few seconds, the water demon swept down the canyon, showing its frothy crest at the bend above the ford, hardly a full score rods above the seemingly doomed travelers.

"Jump—for your life!" shrilly screamed Finley, catching a glimpse of that awful flood as he threw himself back into the disabled wagon—just how, he could never have explained.

He knew, as by instinct, that the wagon was broken too badly for further advance, even if the furiously plunging ponies could be gotten under control in time; and time, with that hideous wall of water rushing down upon them with almost lightning rapidity, was so short!

"Jump—save yourself! Make for shore, and—"

He had time to shout forth that much advice to Victor Baird, who seemed stunned or injured by that violent shock. He had time to catch Flora up in his arms and hold her clear of the "lazy-back," as he leaped over the rear seat, and striking the shallow water, make a desperate dash for shore, hoping against hope that he might have time granted him in which to bear his precious burden up the narrow pass to a point where those mad waters could not touch them.

Only a trained athlete could have done so much. Only a man of exceptional strength of both brain and body could have won fairly clear of the disabled wagon, with such a weight to increase the difficulty of this self-imposed task. And not two men out of a hundred, so fully realizing the awful nature of this flood, would have sacrificed himself in trying to save a stranger.

Finley felt that he must surely fail, yet that thought did not cause him to lose either nerve or dogged resolution to fight unto the very last.

He tore through the shallow water, dashing up the slope, straining every nerve to its utmost tension, fighting furiously to avoid being torn from the rocks as the first of the flood caught him.

Horses and wagon were swept away like straws, and the frothy wave rose to his knees, but he fought on, gaining a foot or two before his feet were twisted from under him.

Even then, he stubbornly struggled for a double life. Even then, flinging out his free arm, his fingers closed upon a point of rock with a grasp which was like a clutch of tempered steel.

The water foamed up over his head, twisting him about, flinging him to and fro, beating his legs and body against the roadway at one moment, then tossing him almost clear of the flood; but still he maintained his grip on the rock-point, still he clasped the form of Flora Baird to his side.

Then—the point of rock broke in his grasp,

and the angry waters sucked them downward and into the middle of the canyon.

But, after all, that desperate fight for life was not entirely a failure, since it had lasted long enough to permit the front of the flood—curling over and over, like a hideous wheel, swallowing up all obstacles in its awful might, to toss them to the surface again, after an interval—to sweep far down the canyon below the crossing.

Pounded, wrenched, half his clothes torn from his body by that terrible struggle, Oscar Finley was still living, still conscious and able to continue his brave fight for, not alone his life, but the life of another even more precious.

Through all he had kept Flora safe looked in his strong arm, and now that they were whirled once more to the surface, his first thought was devoted to the poor girl, and his first action was to lift her head above the water, for a breath of air in case death had not already claimed her for its prey.

"Thank Heaven!" she gasped—she gave a choking cry—full of suffering and full of terror, yet it proved her still alive!

He tried to encourage her with words, but the roar of the torrent refused them even to his own ears. The report of a cannon would hardly have found an echo there between those bare walls.

He tried to look encouragement, but a curling crest of froth smote them in the face, and nearly blinded him with its vicious force.

There was only a single point in their favor, barring the fact that his stubborn grip on the rock had lasted long enough to leave them in a part of the flood far enough back of the rolling face to lessen the danger of being sucked downward and ground to a shapeless mass against the bottom of the canyon.

It required little effort on his part to keep their heads above water. They seemed perched on top of a boiling, up-rising spring, into which it seemed impossible for them to sink.

Shaking the froth from his eyes, as both hands and arms were occupied in holding Flora above the water, Oscar cast a swift look around them, trying to catch a hope of escape, even while death seemed in the act of claiming its prey.

So swiftly were they being swept along between those rugged walls, almost perpendicular here, and rising far above the level of the flood, unusually high though this had lifted the little stream, that Finley was turned dizzy by the flashing rocks. Still, he caught sight of a dead tree being swept along on the flood, and almost unconsciously he began fighting his way toward this support.

Whether a favoring eddy in that swirling surface aided him, or whether he covered the short space purely through his swimming powers, the poor fellow never knew. And all he cared to know, in fact, was that success rewarded his desperate efforts at last!

It was all a mystery, then and thereafter. He could not tell how he reached the log. He never knew how he contrived to place both himself and Flora upon its trunk. All he ever knew was that such things came about, followed by a dizzy, blinding, sickening rush along through those walls, to touch which meant almost certain death!

Like one in a hideous nightmare-dream, he knew that they were coming to an abrupt bend in the canyon, and with an instinctive foresight of what must surely come when the furious flood tried to round that corner, he reached out an arm to protect his helpless charge.

Too late!

With terrific force the log struck the canyon wall, but first, its progress checked so suddenly that the water curled high over the drift, sweeping its living freight away like chaff before the gale!

Oscar lost sight of Flora in that awful moment, for he was plunged headlong into the flood, to be sucked down—still down, by that suddenly created whirlpool!

He felt a stinging pain, as though a chunk of his flesh had been torn from his shoulder by the keen teeth of some ravenous water-demon, and, still like one in a dream, he realized that he had touched the rough rock bottom.

Fortunately it was but a touch, else death in hideous guise would have been his.

He was hardly conscious when he was lifted to the surface once more, still swiftly carried down the canyon to the doom which awaited him. Yet, still true to his trust, he tried to call aloud, tried to discover the poor girl whom he had already learned to value higher than his life by far.

Tried—and failed!

If she had survived the awful shock, the mad waters had widely separated them, and he could detect no signs, even when the walls of the canyon began to widen and draw apart, permitting the flood to spread out, thus lessening its awful force, if not its terrific speed.

Presently this relic of a cloud-burst carried Finley to a spot where one side of the canyon fell abruptly away, forming an irregular slope, where grass and bushes grew among the rocks, giving him almost his first hope of ultimately escaping from the flood with life in his body.

Until now, since that shock as the drift struck the cliff, Oscar had done little to save himself,

though luckily kept above surface by the force of the current itself. Until now he had been dazed, bewildered, almost incapable of thought or action. But as he saw a chance of escape, he began swimming across the current, trying to reach shore.

An eddy, formed by a couple of great rocks, helped him in this, or his very struggles for life might have proved his death; for, while fighting against the current, no longer floating at its will, he seemed to rouse its anger, and its swirls tugged and tried to drag his head beneath the surface.

Caught by the eddy, Finley was swung closer to shore, and after a brief fight, he staggered dizzily up from the water, to stumble and fall, lying motionless, like one conquered in the moment of victory!

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DREAM HAUNTED RANCHMAN.

THE first yellowish tinge to the sky in the east found Jordan Harpe up and about, though it could hardly be said that he had received much benefit from his night of rest, judging from his looks.

He seemed to have wasted pounds in weight since that mysterious disappearance of his guest, Gregory Baird, and in the early dawn he looked ghastly pale, haggard and worn.

Then, too, his nerves had suffered, for as he stood in the open door, gazing under the sharp of his hand toward the yellowing east, the cook caused him a great fright.

It was all so simple, too! Wishing to know what arrangements must be made as to the regular meals that day, the cook approached his employer, using no particular care so far as making a noise was concerned, but as Harpe failed to hear his coming, the fellow lightly tapped him on a shoulder, with:

"I say— Good Lawd!"

Jordan Harpe crouched and shrunk from that tap, giving a hoarse, choking cry as he leaped clear of the threshold, his trembling hands fumbling at the revolvers already belted at his waist.

His face was paler than ever, and though his dark eyes glittered vividly, it was with the fire of fear rather than of anger.

"Don't shoot—I didn't jest mean—" spluttered the cook, dodging behind the cover afforded by the casing.

Jordan Harpe brushed a hand swiftly across his eyes, and as though that action cleared his brain, he broke into a hard, unnatural laugh, cutting it short to call out:

"Dan—was that you, just now?"

"Waal, boss, I ain't so mighty dug-gun sure!" croaked the cook, cautiously venturing a peep around the door casing, only to jerk his head back again. "I did 'low it was, afore you plum skeered the daylights out o' me, but now—"

"Did I startle you, old fellow?" with another laugh.

"Did you, boss; I hain't done jumpin' even yit!"

"Well, we'll call it even, Danny," said his master, a foot on the doorstep, a sickly smile lighting up his still ghastly pale face. "You shocked me out of a year's growth when—don't you ever clap a hand on me again, without first calling out, Dan Puckett!"

"I wouldn't 'a' done it then, boss, ef I'd 'a' reckoned you was so easy set on trigger, but I jest wanted to know how 'bout grub?"

"Get it as soon as you can, and make the coffee strong enough to bounce an iron wedge! And, Dan—never mind mentioning our mutual joke. Fact is, I had some mighty bad dreams last night, and I actually reckoned you were one of the spooks I had a racket with then! So?"

Dan did see, or said so. Possibly he saw more than he was bidden, for as he went back to the kitchen, he indulged in a sneering grin, then went through the significant pantomime of emptying a bottle without cup, glass, or other receptacle save the one designed by nature.

He did his master an injustice by insinuating that he had been "hitting the bottle" entirely too freely of late. Whatever his other weaknesses, Jordan Harpe was no drunkard, and he had spoken no more than the truth when he hinted that his brief slumbers had been disturbed by visions of ugly "haunts."

Although Martin Thompson, the foreman of the Square Ring Ranch, took his meals with "the boss" at the house, he clung to his old bunk where he would be within easier reach of the men who worked under his orders.

Here Jordan Harpe found him, snoring placidly, clearly proof against spooks and all such uncanny cattle; and though he quickly assumed an air and look to suit the occasion, the ranchman knew Thompson was in no danger of going into a decline through worrying over the strange loss of their recent guest.

"Ary bit o' good news, boss?" he asked, smothering a yawn as he rolled out of his rude bunk and pulled on his boots. "Boys from the knob come in yit?"

"No—to both questions," was the gloomy re-

sponse, as the ranchman dropped down on the edge of the bunk. Thompson—pardner?"

"Hyar I be, boss, ready as willin'."

"I know, but—what can even the most willing do, when there's nothing but an ugly muddle before him?"

"Waal, I don't reckon I kin see any furdur through the muddle then *you*, boss, but—we kin keep on tryin', can't we?"

"Of course. We've got to! But—it'll all come to naught! For—do you put any stock in dreams, Mart?"

Thompson raised up from buckling the heavy spurs to his neat, high-heeled cowboy boots. He flashed a keen, curious look into that haggard face, then fell to twisting and pulling at his heavy mustaches.

Under ordinary circumstances, his answer would have been ready and positive enough. He did not believe in dreams, and had a mighty poor opinion of all those who were weak-brained enough to place any faith in such idle vagaries of a diseased or overloaded stomach. But he saw that such an answer would hardly fit in with the present mood of his boss, and like a true courtier he trimmed his sails accordingly.

"Waal, I can't say as I jest make a rule of it, boss, but thar *hev* been times when a odd dream or two o' mine *hes* come mighty nigh—*You hain't bin dreamin', I don't reckon, boss?*"

"I've done nothing else since I bunked in, last night; and such horrible dreams, too!" shivered the ranchman, with a nervous glance over his shoulder to the dark corner of the rude building. "I reckon it started with our call at the old ranch, yesterday, but—I saw more spooks ranked up 'round my bunk, than could be crowded inside that cursed shell, even if they packed ten to the square inch!"

"That's turrible—jest turrible!" sympathetically ejaculated the foreman. "But then, boss, 'twas only dreamin' a'ter all, an' they *do* say dreams goes jest t'other way 'round, so they won't no spooks come raally showin' up to ye—sure!"

"If I reckoned—Thompson, I saw the old gentleman, last night!"

"What!" ejaculated the foreman, his eyes widely opening, his face the picture of amazement. "You don't mean—he hain't come back?"

"Not in the body—worse luck!" with a gloomy frown. "I saw his spirit—and that's all anybody 'll ever see of him again! He's dead, Thompson, and I just know it!"

The foreman turned abruptly aside, unable to smother the laugh that not only fought for free expression in sound, but which he knew was making itself visible on his grinning face, as well.

Harpe sprang to his feet and passed outside, an angry flush tinging his cheekbones. Thompson attempted an apology, but the ranchman would not wait to hear him out, and they did not meet again until the cook summoned them to breakfast.

Neither man referred to the subject while hastily dispatching the morning meal, and Thompson simply nodded his understanding when the boss made him get the cowboys in the saddle and set them to work.

Living or dead, mortal or spirit, Gregory Baird was to be searched for again, and the search maintained until the mystery of his vanishment was completely cleared away.

Jordan Harpe rode over to the Knob, but the cowboys stationed on that prominent landmark had naught to report. They had kept a bright fire going ever since he had seen them last, but no answering signal had been sighted, and nothing had been seen of or heard from the missing man.

After paying this call, and bidding the two men go home for food and repose, Jordan Harpe rejoined his men, as mustered by the foreman.

At first he seemed ill at ease, even embarrassed, but quickly rallying under those curious eyes, he briefly stated the case, then asked their advice as to the right course to follow.

"Shall we spread the word all over, without further delay, or would it be better to wait a little longer?"

"Waal, boss," deliberately spoke up Martin Thompson, as the black eyes of the ranchman lingered on his face. "It's fer *you* to do the jedgin', o' course, but—ef I mought make a hint—I don't reckon I'd be in too mighty big a rush. Thar's a chance that the old gent got skeered at the fire, an' so went astray. Ef so, he'll be found, or turn up his own self, in the course o' this day. An' ef he was to find the bull kentry hed bin turned up on aidge—an' him jest a mite on the high an' top-lofty order, so to speak—like he was a lost kid, that didn't know 'nough fer to come in out o' the wet, why—see?"

"You're right, Thompson!" exclaimed Harpe, with a long breath of relief. "He'd feel it mighty keen, I reckon! So—we'll keep the search on our own hands for this one day, at least! Then—but we'll find him—we've got to find him!"

None who saw and heard Jordan Harpe just then, could doubt his intense anxiety. He was suffering, beyond a doubt.

"Just as ef—"

"It's his pocket, pard," guardedly amended his mate, as they rode off to resume the search.

"No find, no sell—see?"

Be that as it might, Jordan Harpe took precious little rest that day, nor did he require any urging to make him face the terrors of the Haunted Ranch. Leading the search himself, he caused the uncanny place to be ransacked from top to bottom, looking for sign where it was a physical impossibility for a body, living or dead, to lie hidden. And though the tracks they had left the evening before rendered it an almost hopeless task, he caused the ground round about the building to be scanned by keen eyes, foot by foot.

The neighborhood of the spring, where Gregory Baird had been lost sight of, was likewise worked most thoroughly, only to end in complete disappointment.

After that, the search was absolutely aimless. No one had any idea where it would be wisest to look for the missing man, and all they could do was to scatter widely, trusting to blind luck.

For the most part, this aimless roving took place on the Square Ring side of the little river, because, knowing fairly well the location of the ranch, it was most likely Gregory Baird had lost himself somewhere in that direction.

The rising of the storm-cloud beyond the hills lying to the northwest, was noticed by all, but no one dreamed of what it actually meant. Thinking only of a heavy downfall of rain, which would surely blot out such faint trail as Gregory Baird might have left behind him in his wanderings, Jordan Harpe urged his men to renewed efforts.

The company was widely scattered when the cloud burst, for the most part at a distance from the bed of the river down which the tumultuous torrent rolled with resistless might; but even those who were furthest away, noted the heavy rumbling, roaring sound that seemed to them like the tremblings of a far-off earthquake.

Jordan Harpe was one of those at the great distance from the canyon when the cloud let loose its mighty burden; and though he heard the faint roaring, and turned a glance in that direction, he failed to take in its true meaning, and doubtless would have resumed his aimless quest, only for catching sight of a distant horseman riding at a furious rate toward the canyon.

What had he found? What had been discovered? Surely not—

He saw the fellow lift a hand and discharge all barrels of his revolver into the air, and he waited for no more, but sent his good horse in that direction as swiftly as voice, lash and spur combined could make him travel.

Although the flood had greatly subsided when he reached the edge of the chasm, it was still a torrent, and had left ample evidence of its first terrible power, high along those rocky walls.

A number of cowboys had gathered at the same spot, and were busily discussing the strange event, grimly speculating on the chance any one would have who was luckless enough to be caught in its bad embrace, while the dream-haunted ranchman was staring moodily at the flowing waters, heedless of their words, heedless of all save the problem—

"Look yender!" suddenly cried one of the cowboys, pointing down the canyon bank to a man racing recklessly toward them, to shout excitedly:

"I've found him, boss! Found him—too dead to skin!"

CHAPTER XXX.

WHAT THE COWBOY FOUND.

JORDAN HARPE recoiled, involuntarily jerking his horse back until its haunches almost touched the ground.

If his face had been pale before, it was fairly ghastly now. His eyes were staring, his lips curling back until his exposed teeth, white and strong, gave him an almost wolfish look as he glared at the excited cowboy who brought such startling tidings.

"Found who?" hoarsely cried the ranchman, rallying with an evident effort. "What have you found, and where?"

"The old gent—lodged in a tree, too dead fer skinnin'!"

"You lie, curse ye!" snarled Harpe, lifting a hand as though to dash his clinched fist into the face of the one who dared bring such black tidings.

The cowboy recoiled, wheeling his horse in readiness for flight if nothing less might save him. But his honest face flushed hotly at that fierce insult, and his voice hardened as he made reply:

"Ef they's a lie out atween us, boss, 'tain't o' my makin'! What I say, I kin back up by the showin', ef you'll take the trouble to ride a bit down yan' way!"

Once again the ranchman shrunk back; all saw as much, but they put no evil interpretation on it. They knew how much their boss must have worried over that unaccountable disappearance of his honored guest, and even they—with so much less at stake—were awed and shocked by the terrible solution offered by that discovery.

Jordan Harpe rallied again, and forced a wan smile as he saw how justly offended the

cowboy was by his savage speech. He knew that he might soon be meeting all his friends, even such an humble one as this, and he hastily apologized:

"I didn't mean just that, Johnston, but—it don't seem possible! Dead—lodged in a tree, you say?"

"An' it's hatin' it mightily I am to say it, boss," replied the cowboy, already forgetting those harsh words. "But—thar it lays, hangin' on a tree, hafe way up the kenyon side; an' from—"

"Where? Lead the way—at once!" hoarsely muttered the ranchman, turning a vacant glance toward another horseman who came trotting up at that juncture.

"What's up now, boys?" asked the foreman, as he reined in his steed. "You look like grim death on— Eh?"

In a guarded tone, one of the cowboys informed Thompson of the discovery just made, and even his rugged seasoned face turned a bit paler as he fell in, following the ranchman and his guide, down the edge of the canyon.

"An' me jest now a-cussin' the crooked luck that didn't fetch the hunt to an end!" he muttered, huskily, more to himself than to his neighbors. "But I didn't reckon—how could I think it'd hev sech a round-up as *this*?"

The ride was of short duration, and leaping from his saddle, the cowboy took one hasty look over the escarpment, as though to make sure his eyesight had not deceived him. Then, turning toward Harpe, he pointed downward, gravely uttering:

"I wish I was the liar ye called me, boss, back yender, but—ye kin see fer yerself, ef ye'll jest take a look down thar-a-ways!"

Jordan Harpe dismounted, more like an old and sorely shaken man than with his customary panther-like activity. He crept close to the edge, gripping an arm of the cowboy as though feeling the need of some such support, then craned his neck and glanced downward.

He drew back with a sharp, gasping breath, closing his lids as if the depth made his brain dizzy. But this weakness lasted only for an instant. Then, more like his old-time self, he sunk upon his knees and leaned far over the escarpment.

Less than two-score feet below his level, an oak tree had taken root in a crack marring the face of the wall, growing stout and tough, though somewhat stunted in dimensions.

The flood had reached a little above the roots of this tree, its first force partly uprooting it, causing it to bend over until its trunk formed an angle, pointing down-stream, its branches flattened against the wall.

A small quantity of sticks and other drift had lodged on the tree, and now, half-concealed by this debris, one could imperfectly distinguish the body of—was it a man?

"Tain't no dumb critter, anyway!" declared Thompson, who was peering keenly at that gruesome object. "An'—ef it's the old gent, then the water must 'a' squeeze him out a heap sight thinner than I knowed him in life—it jest *did*, now!"

"Thank Heaven for— Are you sure, man?" gasped the owner of the Square Ring Ranch, drawing back as he spoke.

"Stiddy, boss!" hastily warned the cowboy, feeling the hand tremble as it clutched his knee.

"Best keep back, ef ye feel dizzy, like!"

"Not to say dead sure, boss," responded Thompson, after another keen look at the partly hidden body below. "But jedgin' from what I kin see, thar hain't jest the bigness a body'd reckon—though the water *may* hev made some difference, an' so—"

"Quick! get to work!" cried the ranchman, rallying from that sickening dizziness which had spread a mist over his aching eyes. "Maybe he's not dead! Maybe he can be saved to—Ropes, curse ye for sluggards!" he cried, springing to his feet and leaping over to where his own horse stood waiting. "Rig ropes and get him out o' there!"

Thus given a cue to work upon, the cowboys wasted very little time in making arrangements for the rescue.

A stout loop was formed in which a man might sit while being lowered down to the drift-laden tree. Another was formed, in readiness to be slipped around the body. And when this was done, Jordan Harpe was quietly but resolutely forestalled by Martin Thompson.

"Twon't make the left any lighter, mebbe," he said, "but I hed a sound night's sleep, which you wasn't so lucky. Then—waal, it wants a cool head an' a stiddy boss, to make sech a job sure. An' you've worried so mighty much over this onlucky a'fa'r, that it'd be a mighty wonder ef you wasn't kind o' unstrung, like. See?"

"Have your way, Thompson, but—get it over with!" muttered Harpe, as he turned nervously away. "I can't stand much more of this, man!"

The foreman nodded to his men, then seated himself in the loop and deftly backed over the edge, a moment later being slowly lowered toward the spot where that half-naked body lay, its face hidden, its limbs without motion, seemingly cold in death.

Without trusting his full weight on the tree,

tasked as it had been by the flood, Thompson steadied himself and began removing the sticks and leaves which obscured the body.

"Tain't the old gent, anyway—tell the boss!" he shouted, when he had been at work only a few seconds. "It's a heap sight younger man, an'—I'll hev a squint at his face afore a minnit!"

He was good as his word, too, but brief as was the period he mentioned, Thompson made still another discovery before it elapsed.

"He hain't clean dead, nuther!" rose his voice, excitedly. "I kin feel him shiver! An'—stiddy, now, you, up yender!"

Taking time only sufficient to assure himself that the face was that of a stranger to him, Thompson deftly secured the second rope around the body, close under the shoulders, then helped to ease the strain on the now feebly-moaning man, as he gave the word to haul away.

Coming free of the tree across which the flood had balanced it, the body of Victor Baird rose slowly into the air, Thompson bearing it company, guarding it from rude contact with the rough rock points.

The ascent was made in safety, and when both men had been lifted over the escarpment to the level, the cowboys vented their excitement in a chorus of cheers, partly in praise of their foreman's cool daring, partly because they all could see that a living man had been rescued in place of the corpse they had expected.

Bruised, sadly the worse for his brief immersion in that terrible flood, Victor Baird lay unconscious of the rough faces and tender hands about him. He was breathing faintly, and once or twice flinched feebly as Thompson felt of his ribs and his limbs, to learn the full extent of his injuries.

"Thar's a arm broke, but I cain't find nothin' wuss, outside. Ef he come off as easy *inside*, then a luckier critter never was born!"

"Rig a litter, and fetch him to the ranch," said Harpe, mounting. "I'll go prepare a bed, and get everything in readiness."

Intensely relieved he looked much more like his usual self, now that the cowboy's very natural mistake was made clear; but when his good horse carried him back to the ranch, another shock awaited its own-r. Pinned to the front door was another written note, and tearing it down, with a savage oath, Jordan Harpe read the words:

"JORDAN HARPE:—

"Give over your search for Gregory Baird, under penalty! If you obey, he'll turn up in good time. If you refuse, he'll likewise turn up—*toes up!*"

CHAPTER XXXI.

GOGGLES FINDS A WHITE ELEPHANT.

ALTHOUGH Flora Baird could hardly be said to have entirely lost her consciousness, even for a moment, since that terrible rush of water swept them all away from the ford, it would be too much to say that she actually realized her extremely perilous situation, even after Oscar Finley contrived to place her upon that swiftly moving log.

That frightful roaring, the dizzying whirl of the yellow waters, the rough pounding and pulling and twisting to which the whirlpool-like torrent had subjected her, added to that breathless descent of the canyon, all combined to stupefy and benumb her senses, both mental and physical.

Unlike Finley, she never took thought of the abrupt bend in the narrow channel, or what would happen there; unlike him, she made no effort to meet or foil the coming shock, and perhaps she fared all the better for that very impassiveness.

The heavy log struck squarely against the rock, butt-foremost, with tremendous force. And—as by a miracle—a portion of the seemingly solid wall flew open, just in time to save the maiden from crashing against the rock!

Two feet further to the right or to the left, and this seeming miracle could not have happened. Or, had the level of the flood been even a foot lower, the log would have spent its force against an immovable wall, instead of opening a way for Flora Baird to escape a cruel death!

The shock flung the maiden straight ahead, into the narrow opening, where the swift rush of water, entering at the same place, formed a sort of cushion to preserve her from broken limbs, if not instantaneous death through striking the rocky floor.

The shock was quite sufficient to scatter the poor girl's remaining wits, and had not kind Providence still befriended her, the end might well have been the cruel one so feared by Oscar Finley.

The in-curling wave which caught her form as she shot into the opening so strangely formed, bore Flora swiftly onward and inward, casting her upon a slight slope of rock, as the rising floor limited its further progress. Thus it happened that the "undertow" did not bear the senseless body back with it, as the crest of the wave recoiled.

In this recoil, the portion of wall which had opened, was swung back to its former position

by the wave, and as the flood was momentarily lowering, now that the first terrible wave had swept far down the canyon, the rock maintained its place, covering with darkness the maiden so wondrously preserved from the flood.

Perhaps it was merciful that Flora had lost her senses for the time being, for in that dark den the roaring of the swiftly-rolling waters without, beating against the curve of the canyon, was almost deafening for a few minutes. Then, little by little, the tremendous din lessened as the waters fell in height, and long before the poor girl stirred slightly, giving a faint gasp of reviving consciousness, only a low, indistinct murmur found its way into that strange place.

Slowly, dully at first, Flora struggled back to life and reason, for many minutes unable to recall aught that had occurred. After a dim, vague, troubled fashion, she knew that some terrible thing had transpired, and that she had been placed in some great peril; but just what that peril had been, or who had shared it with her, she could not recall for a long time.

Like one still under the spell of an ugly nightmare dream, she knew that she was suffering; that her body was aching dully, that she was chilled to the bone, that her garments were wet and—

Then something of the awful truth flashed across her bewildered brain, and starting to a sitting posture, the poor girl glanced around through the darkness—a darkness broken by a single dim light.

"Father—brother—where am I?" she gasped, shivering with horror, shrinking away from—she hardly knew what.

Little by little the awful facts came back to her. She recalled her brief view of that hideous wall of roaring, tumbling, curling water. She remembered that they had been overwhelmed by it, and then—

A choking sob of grief welled up in her throat, and as she began to more fully realize the awful doom which must surely have overtaken her beloved brother, Flora sunk back upon the cold, damp stones, panting and moaning, half-crazed with misery.

The shock was so heavy that it partially benumbed the poor girl, else her overtasked brain might easily have given way in those first moments. As it was, she lay long without power to think or reason, only beginning to rally from the shock after many long minutes had crept along.

As she poor girl at length realized that she had been saved from death, though as yet ignorant of the manner in which that horrible flood had been cheated, a ray of hope began to spring up in her heart. Since she still lived, might not Victor have been equally fortunate?

It was with this struggling hope animating her, that Flora crept painfully toward that irregular patch of light, dimly wondering where she was, and what made all so gloomy about her.

It had been early—not past the middle of the afternoon—when they reached the canyon and were surprised by the flood. Surely night could not have come so soon? Surely that light—what could it be?

Creeping on hands and knees toward the light, Flora had almost reached it, when her head struck against some immovable object. She recoiled with a low cry, but then lifted her hands and felt them stopped by cold, solid rock!

She was walled in—but how? By what strange means? Had she been rescued by some brave being, then left here to—

She could not reason it out, and bending a little lower, she tried to learn from whence that ragged patch of light came.

There was a narrow opening in the rock, barely large enough for her to thrust an arm through, a little past her elbow. She could move her hand, as though the opening widened just beyond, but that was all. She could not see clear through. Only a dull, discolored bit of gray rock was visible.

Although she had no means of knowing this, just, then, the heavy blow given by the log on which Oscar Finley had placed his charge, had broken a small fragment from the side and lower corner of the cunningly contrived door of stone in forcing the barrier open. Had Flora possessed the right degree of knowledge, even her feeble strength would have sufficed to sway open that barrier: without that knowledge only a tremendous force similar to that water-hurled battering-ram could clear a passage through the canyon wall at that point.

Flora could almost catch a glimpse of the yellow sunlight as it was reflected into the canyon. She could hear a faint murmuring as of flowing water—and she knew that this must come from the little river which they had attempted to cross at such an unfortunate moment.

The memory turned her heart sick, but only for a brief space, for the brave, resolute spirit which Gregory Baird had given his children, was surely gaining the upper hand.

"The flood has passed! There is nothing to fear from that—*now!* Victor must be near—perhaps searching for me!"

Trying to believe this, making the most of that truly frail hope, Flora cried aloud, shout-

ing the name of her brother through that split, then listening breathlessly for the longed-for answer.

Only a dull, indistinct echo from the blackness behind her.

Again and still again she repeated that cry, varying it by appeals for help, little dreaming whose ears had caught those echoes, or the nature of the assistance even then stealing cautiously toward her.

The dim light was enough to reveal her head and shoulders to those protruding eyes, and Goggles clapped a broad palm over his own lips as he found the solution of those echoes.

"Holy smoke!" he inwardly ejaculated, midway between surprise and dismay. "A woman critter! An' inside the—*waal*, that gits me!"

"An' we've got to git her, pard!" came a low, guarded whisper from another of the outlaws, close to his heels.

Goggles gave a start and uttered a low cry of angry fright, so completely had he been taken by surprise. Until that moment he had thought himself alone in making that marvelous discovery.

Flora caught that sound, and with a low, agitated cry she turned away from the crevice, to stare anxiously into the darkness, panting:

"Who is it? Surely—oh, sir, help me save my poor brother!"

"Play her light, pard!" mumbled the rear outlaw. "I'll hold back—find out how come ye so, an' ef thar's any other in hyer!"

Goggles, thus urged on, and naturally believing that Flora had caught sight of him, as he had of her, shuffled clumsily forward, never before so wholly at a loss what to say or how to act.

"Hope I see ye, mum! Fine day fer—stiddy, you!" breaking off with a touch of fright, as Flora sprung to her feet and impulsively sprung through the gloom, catching his outflung hands as by instinct.

"Victor—my brother—say that he is safe! Tell me that you rescued him even as you must have saved me from the flood! Where is he? Take me to him! Oh, sir, pray be merciful and relieve my fears!"

"Waal, mum, ye see—" stammered Goggles, more than ever taken aback, with just wits enough to feel like cursing his mate for having pushed him forward to bear the brunt.

"Wait—let me have time—give me a moment to rally," murmured Flora, releasing his arm and covering her own eyes, fearing the worst from his confused manner.

Goggles was willing enough, be sure! And he made the most of that brief respite to partially collect his own scattered wits.

"Now—tell me the whole bitter truth, sir," at length said the maiden, with painfully enforced composure. "He is—he was hurt by the flood? He sent you to bring me to his side? I am ready, if—"

Her voice choked, and she could not finish the sentence, but her few words had given Goggles a clew, and he jumped blindly at it.

"Waal, yes, mum, I *do* reckon mebbe he ketched a weenty hurt or two in the freshet, but nothin' fer to git skeered at. Yit—"

"You are not—you surely would not try to deceive me?" piteously gasped the poor child, trying to read the whole truth in his face.

The gloom prevented this. It was with difficulty that she could even trace his outline.

"Would I lie to the likes o' you, mum?" spluttered Goggles, trying to cast a mournful reproach into his tones, but only succeeding in rendering them more owlish.

"He is safe? Then—take me to him, dear sir, and I'll bless you through life!" cried Flora, impetuously. "Oh, pray take me to my poor brother! I can't realize it! I can't believe he is alive, without seeing his face and hearing his dear voice! Hurry—oh, make haste!"

"Waal, you see, mum, thar's a few things—jest so, mum!" playing for time by simulating a husky coughing spell. "Durn my—I mean, mum, 'tain't nothin' ketchin', but ef I hain't swallered a frog when I never knowed it, then I want to know why!"

"I am very sorry, dear sir, but—pray let us go! I can't thank you now, for saving me from the flood, for I can only think of poor Victor! He is my only brother, sir, and we love each other dearly. And—I was so afraid that he had—that he had not escaped so well! He did—you are sure he is—is not seriously hurt?"

The poor girl hardly realized what words crossed her lips, her agitation and excitement ran so high. Only for that, she must have had strong suspicions awakened by the clumsy manner in which Goggles delayed.

As for him, he felt very much as a man might with a huge and hungry elephant thrown upon his hands at an instant's warning!

"I say, critters, what's the racket down hyar?" at that juncture came a peculiar, hissing voice from out the darkness.

"Glory to Moses, pard!" ejaculated Goggles, in whose ears that repulsive voice sounded as the sweetest of music, just then. "You're jest in time to—hyar's a blessed lady, wants to be tuck to her brother, which she says—which we must 'a' hauled out o' the drink. Jest like we did her—see?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

ONLY too glad of a chance to shift the responsibility upon other shoulders, Goggles lastly spluttered forth this rather mixed explanation, then shuffled away in the darkness, ready to betake himself to actual flight, rather than stand and take more of this "medicine."

Luckily for him, Old Snags was not a man to flinch from even a disagreeable responsibility, and though the manner in which this young woman had contrived to get inside that place, was even more a mystery to him than to Goggles, since he had only caught the last appeal made by Flora, he assumed the lead with far more tact than his partner had displayed.

"We'll do the best we kin fer ye, ma'am," he said, softening his disagreeable tones as much as he possibly could, not to frighten the poor girl. "But—wait a bit, ef you please," cutting short the agitated appeal which had, so far, met with such poor gratification. "As I started to say, ma'am, we'll 'blige ye all we know how, but afore that, you want to git a weenty bit more stiddy, like."

"I will—I'll try to compose myself, but if you only knew—"

"Which is jest what I want ma'am," with a short, husky laugh. "Ye see, I wasn't into the thick of it, an' so don't know jest how she come about. How did *you* git in hyar, ma'am?"

On that point Flora could give no light, of course, but Old Snags, by varying his questions to suit, soon contrived to glean all the maiden could tell him.

It was fortunate for the outlaw that the gloom was so deep, else he surely would have betrayed himself when Flora gave her name, and the names of her brother and father.

A wild and eventful life had pretty well accustomed him to strange and startling happenings, but nothing less than the evidence just before his eyes could have convinced Old Snags that he was listening to the simple truth.

It was not only the fact that a weak, frail woman had escaped death after being fairly swallowed up by that awful flood, though that was marvelous enough. But how had she come here, with that cunningly contrived door still closed? And, more yet! The same rocky roof that covered her head, formed part of the prison containing her father!

His startled musings were interrupted by Flora, whose anxiety in regard to her brother seemed to increase rather than subside.

"Please take me to Victor, sir!" her voice trembling and barely audible, for this being inspired her with a feeling of awe, almost terror, doubtless because of his peculiarly disagreeable voice. "He said—that other gentleman told me—my brother was safe."

"Waal, ma'am, I ain't knowin' to that of my own self," quietly responded the veteran. "I wasn't jest nigh 'nough fer to hev a finger in the pie, but ef he said so—reckon it's all right!"

"And—you will lead me to him, dear sir?"

"Yes, I'll lead you right straight to him!" decided Old Snag, the darkness hiding the grim smile that caused his beard to bristle even more busily than customary. "An' ef he don't jest crack the neck o' me with a hug o' pure delight, it'll be beca'se he's got a dug-gun sight prittier one fer to practice on! Waal, now, I jest reckon!"

Drawing Flora's hand through his arm, Old Snags turned his back to the light and moved into the denser darkness. Flora hesitated, a sensation of fright assailing her.

"Is—must we go this way, sir? I thought that light—"

"Ain't nothin' but jest a weenty crack fer a air-hole ma'am," the fellow sibilated, partly smothering a laugh. "Ef it's too dark, ma'am, mebby ye'd make it lighter ef ye'l jest shet the two pritty eyes o' ye fer a bit. Es fer me, I kin see like a owl!"

"I'm not afraid, for— You are leadin' me to him?"

"I be, fer a fact, ma'am! Leadin' you straight as a string to him!" declared Old Snags, still with that odd chuckle barely above his breath.

Flora said nothing more, though it was like groping through a mass of darkness almost dense enough to be felt. She would not doubt! Why should she doubt? Heaven had preserved her life, and surely it would not be less kindly disposed toward Victor?

Neither did Old Snags waste breath in talk. He seemed content to enjoy his little jest in silence, possibly reasoning that one relative was just as good as another in a case like this.

For he had resolved to take Flora direct to her father!

He did not bother his brain greatly about what his master would have to say, when the truth came to his knowledge. The fact that, by some strange, inexplicable manner, Flora Baird had been cast into the very cavern where her father was held a prisoner, surely would be sufficient excuse for his acting without waiting for advice from headquarters.

"Jest a few fellers the freshet driv' to kiver hyar," Old Snags said, in off-hand explanation of the shadowy, phantom-like figures which were occasionally to be seen in the dimly-lighted por-

tions of the cave. "They won't bother you, ef you don't bother them, I go bail!"

Then—father and daughter met!

Old Snags fell back, rubbing his hands together, giving forth his harsh, hissing laugh as he watched that meeting. And what a meeting!

Gregory Baird in bonds, pale and haggard already, though his captivity had been of such brief duration.

Flora Baird, her garments torn and stained, her face bearing more than one sad bruise, the work of the flood.

"I said I'd lead ye to a him, ma'am," chuckled Old Snags. "An' as I didn't say jest which sort o' him that him'd be, I don't reckon ye kin call me a plum' liar, anyway!"

"You infernal devil!" hoarsely cried Gregory Baird.

"Whar's my tail, an' split huffs, an' horns, critter?" laughed Old Snags, turning away to fling over his shoulder: "I'll git out o' sight long 'nough fer you to do a little chinnin' long o' yer lonesome selves, but don't fergit that I'll be plenty nigh fer to putt a stop to any meddlin' with them ropes. Ef *you* try that on, gal, I'll s'arve ye out with a suit o' the same cut—I jest will, now!"

Without waiting for a reply, he slouched off; to join Goggles and the other outlaw who had been before him in discovering the maiden, anxious to learn if they could explain the mystery of her entrance.

Left together, father and daughter managed to tell their stories with tolerable clearness, though poor Flora was almost heartbroken as she began to fairly realize the situation. Surely, there was trouble sore and terrible enough without this!

For, after being so shamefully betrayed by those to whom she had felt such heart-deep gratitude, neither Flora nor her father dared hope for the safety of Victor.

Still, though helpless in such thoroughly evil hands, there was a certain amount of comfort to be extracted from the mere fact of their being together, free to talk and encourage each other, if no more. And so, little by little, something of their old-time courage began to come back, and they were calm enough to compare notes.

When Gregory Baird learned of the telegram, in his name, which had been the means of bringing brother and sister to Longhorn, he ground his strong teeth together in a spasm of deadly fury.

Up to that hour he had forced himself to believe that Jordan Harpe—as he more than ever believed his masked enemy to be—had been holding a false weapon over his head while threatening to play the next card before the children instead of the father; but now he could no longer cling to that hope.

"The pitiless devil!" he grated, savagely, great veins starting out on his temples. "He may break me down, now, through you, my precious; but—I'll have his life for it in the end! I'll kill him like a dog!"

A true woman, Flora tried to console him, by soothing his bedewed brow. She murmured words of hope and consolation in his ear, even while her own poor heart was bleeding, even while she saw, in horrible fancy, the bruised and mangled corpse of her dearly beloved brother, lying where the flood had hurled it.

Oh, it was horrible—horrible!

Although neither father nor daughter paid any attention to the fact, a tall, muffled-up figure had slowly passed in front of the rock chamber, back and forth, each time stealing a glance at their dimly visible shapes. Then, with a swift glance around to make sure that Old Snags, who was talking in low tones to Goggles and another outlaw not far distant, was not looking that way, this muffled form sprung into the chamber, dropping a note into the lap of the startled maiden, hastily muttering in clear but guarded tones:

"Read what it says, then destroy! Hope for the best, and play for time! I swear to save you—if mortal man can!"

Only those few words, for he dared not linger lest Old Snags or some other of the gang surprise him. Then, leaving the chamber, he walked carelessly past the outwitted guards, without being noticed or halted.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS.

It was a comparatively early hour of the night following the cloud-burst, that a human figure stole cautiously up to the rear of the dilapidated stable which had survived the destruction of all the other out-buildings by which the Haunted Ranch had been attended in former days.

Pausing there in the dense shade, this being swept the space around with keen, suspicious eyes, making no further move until he felt fully assured that no unfriendly notes were being taken.

Satisfied on this point at length, he slipped through a ragged hole in the planking, and pausing once more, he drew an object from his bosom which, when shaken out of its folds and drawn over his head, proved to be one of the black bag-like hoods or cowls worn by the ma-

jority of the law-breakers who worked and schemed in the cavern beneath the Uncanny Ranch.

Having hidden his face thus, the fellow stole a cautious look out at the side opposite to the one he had first reached, then, seeing and hearing nothing to excite his alarm, he turned to the manger whose peculiarities have been alluded to in another place.

Lifting the false bottom, slipping into the shallow pit thus laid bare, pausing long enough to replace the covering snugly, the masked knave passed along the hidden way, just as he had done on the night before in company with Old Snags, though after the reverse order.

Pausing presently, the chief fumbled about in the dark for a brief space until his hand found and pulled a wire. No sound came to his own ears in consequence, but right well he knew that, far below, in the cavern where his evil gang were congregated, a silver-toned bell was softly tinkling in response to that pull at the wire.

Creeping on a few yards further, the chief halted again, one hand searching for and finding a hollow spout lying close to the side of that passage, the other bringing several round pebbles from a pocket.

One by one, slowly counting between the intervals, these pebbles were dropped into the tube, and dimly the chief could hear the echo of their striking inside the rusty coffee-pot awaiting them below.

As on the night before, the dropping of the third pebble brought a speedy signal from the lower depths that all was in readiness, and when the ropes from below set the trap-door free, the chief, too impatient to make use of the platform itself, grasped the ropes with his gloved hands, briskly sliding down until his feet touched the rock-floor.

As before, there was no light close at hand, though his practiced eyes could make out several hooded figures standing near, and of them in general he quickly asked the question:

"Nothing gone wrong here, of course?"

"I don't reckon, boss," volunteered one of the Black-Caps. "Anyway, the old gent is thar—Snags watchin' him wuss'n a hungry cat lickin' his lips fer a fat mouse!"

"Pity you all weren't Old Snags, for then we'd run against a mighty sight fewer snags!" a bit viciously laughed the chief, as he passed them by, heading direct for the rock chamber where he had last seen his valuable captive, Gregory Baird.

He was not to reach this, however, without interruption. Old Snags met him at a little distance from the cell, as though instinct warned him of that approach.

For any other member of that lawless gang, the subject would have been an awkward one to broach; but Old Snags had plenty of excuses and plausible arguments to back up his conduct.

At first, the chief seemed inclined to "cut up rusty" when he heard how Flora Baird had been taken to her father.

"Why didn't you keep them separate, curse ye?" he snarled fiercely.

Partly because Goggles, in his amazement, had led her to believe the brother over whom she was grieving so bitterly, was alive and not far away. To deceive her so abruptly, after what she had already undergone, might easily have killed the poor girl. So—

Too impatient to listen further, the chief lifted a hand, asking:

"How much did you tell them? How much do they know of the truth?"

"Not a smiteb, boss! Not a ioty more'n you let on to the old gent o' your own a'cord, adding, with a hissing chuckle: "But ef you could on'y know how them two critters he's kept a-peltin' of me with I-want-to-know's, an' do tell-me-this-that-an'-t'other's! Boss, ef I reckoned it hed to keep up that-a-way much longer, durned ef I wouldn't hev to 'vent a b'iler-iron overcoat fer to perfect my own self!"

"It'll not last much longer: rest easy as to that, old fellow," his master laughed, harshly. "I've got to simmer things down in a hurry, or run the risk of having the fat kicked into the fire!"

"Nothin' new gone wrong, boss?"

"Nothing that can't be remedied, by careful work, maybe. I'll see you later, Snags! Just now, I've got a bit of sermon to deliver to our very dear friends back yonder!"

Notwithstanding his apparent haste, the chief found time to linger at the entrance to the chamber in which Gregory Baird was confined, to take a few notes while he himself was unseen in the gloom beyond that circle of dim light.

Although Flora, of course, had no facilities for renewing her wardrobe, and with her mind half-distracted by fears for her father, and mourning for her brother, she had managed to partially repair the damages wrought by the flood. And now, though her face was paler than usual, showing signs of tears and anxiety, the chief thought he had never before looked upon a face one-tenth part as lovely.

"Better than gold—if one could win it, freely!" he thought, his gloved hands clenching tightly. "If I'd only known—if I'd only sighted that face before—bah!" with a short, hard laugh

coming from his lips, the harsh sound startling Flora, and bringing a black frown to her father's face.

Seeing that he had unwittingly betrayed himself, the chief of the Black-Caps stepped into the light, bowing with mock profoundness.

"Good evening, Gregory! Your humble servant, Miss Flora! I *did* intend asking after your respective healths but that would be superfluous, having taking a fair look into your blooming—"

"Drop that you infernal cur!" harshly growled Baird, then flashing a stern glance into the paling face of his daughter, he added: "Turn your back to the dog, daughter!"

"And a very trim, graceful back it is, too!" gravely asserted the chief, as Flora instinctively followed that stern command.

"You cur!" panted Baird, fairly beside himself with impotent rage. "What do you want here? What makes you come to—"

"Father—please!"

Just two words, but within them was compressed a warning which the angered speculator understood, despite his rage. And in a lowered tone of voice he added:

"Treat me as you like, but don't molest her. I can't stand that!"

"I'm delighted to hear you say so, Gregory," chuckled his captor. "Not because it proves you have a loving heart, as a tender parent should, as because it shows me just how to bring you back to reason should that execrable temper of yours ever cause you to kick clean over the traces! For, Gregory, old boy, I've called to talk business with you: business, pure and simple!"

"Cut it as short as you can, then," sulkily growled his victim.

Gregory Baird was far from being a fool. He knew that he was acting the very reverse of wisely, in thus giving way to his temper. And all this after he and Flora had agreed to control their dislike, to hold their temper in check, to play the diplomatists to the extent of their ability whenever the arch-villain should next put in an appearance on the scene.

Although it contained nothing very definite, both father and child placed much dependence in that curiously delivered note, bidding them play for time. And now—

"I'll be brief, Gregory Baird, for my own sake, it not for yours," said the chief, his tones growing hard and cold. "I've called on business, and if you're wise enough to meet me even quarter way, we'll wind up our little account with a flourish of bugles!"

"Say on: what is it you want of me?"

"The root of all evil, to be sure! But there are a few trifling preliminaries to settle, first, of course. Now—open your ears, my dear fellow!"

"I've been doing considerable thinking since I last saw you, and as matters have taken on an entirely different complexion since that hour, I have altered my terms a bit, to suit."

"I told you then that I'd not hit you very hard, not being built after the boggish pattern. I said that I would be content with the amount you were to pay Jordan Harpe in solid cash, in case he and you could come to terms as to the other payments. And that cash payment was to be an even fifty thousand, I believe. Am I right?"

"You surely ought to know, if any one, Jordan Harpe!"

"Haven't you got shut of that flea yet?" mocked the mask, but with an echo of irritation in his tones. "All right! I'm not kicking. It may work in advantageously after all! But—business!"

"I put my figures at that notch, Gregory, but I've seen cause to raise the limit a bit higher since that date, and now I mean to ask an even \$75,000 for your life and liberty!"

"I'll see you—"

"Father—dear father!" murmured Flora flinging her arm about his neck, hurriedly whispering, too low for even those keen ears hidden beneath that sable hood, "Time—win time!"

"And the harder you kick against the pricks, the deeper you'll grow, Gregory," laughed his captor, significantly. "My time is very valuable, and I'll charge you accordingly, be sure of that. If you fail to come to an agreement to-night, to-morrow the Baird stock may take another upward bound. I'm little better than a scoundrel for valuing your life and liberty so low, as it is!"

It was difficult for the hot-tempered man to choke back his rage, but knowing that he was impotent to save, should this arch-villain see fit to molest Flora, he did his level best to temporize.

"If I thought I could trust you—but, how can I?"

"By shutting your eyes and taking the plunge blindly," chuckled the Black-Cap, feeling almost sure of success now that he had gained so much of a concession. "You can't do anything else, Gregory. Some one has got to go it blind, and that's not my nature. So—see?"

"Have you no mercy no pity, no spark of generosity, man?"

"That's heap sight better sounding than devil,

anyway," nodded the rascal, rubbing his gloved hands together as if in approval. "By the time our bargain is concluded, you'll be ready to fling both arms about my neck and fill my bosom to running over with tears of love!"

He seemed maliciously seeking to drive Baird into another outburst of rage, but scenting a trap, the prisoner held his hot temper in check.

"If I consent to pay this outrageous amount of money, how can I know that you'll keep your part of the bargain? What's to hinder your pocketing the money, then butchering me—or demanding another sum?"

"All that can be arranged to suit even your critical taste, Mr. Baird," his tones and manner altering abruptly. "The main question is—will you pay the amount of cash I demand?"

Gregory Baird hesitated, his brows strongly contracted. Flora, her fears fully aroused, hastily murmured:

"Say yes, dear father! Anything—everything! You are all I have, now, and—say yes, for my sake!"

But Gregory Baird was recalling that note of warning, and when he spoke, it was with a hope suggested by that bit of paper.

"Give me time to think it over, sir. Give me—I'll answer you positively in—say this hour to-morrow!"

"Agreed!" flashed the outlaw, but adding, "But make up your mind to accept my offer—for your son's sake, if not your own!"

"My son! What of him? Where is he?" breathlessly cried Baird.

"Alive, but—how long he lives, depends solely on you!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A MISSION FOR OLD SNAGS.

WITHOUT waiting to say more, paying no attention to the agitated questions which burst from both father and daughter, the chief of the Black-Caps turned away and left the chamber.

From beneath his mask there came a low, hard chuckle of grim satisfaction, for now he felt fairly well assured that he would succeed in bending that proud will to meet his foul ends.

"How goes it, boss?" hissed the unmistakable voice of Old Snags, though the speaker was almost invisible there in that gloomy passage.

"Reckon you've bin able fer to putt the cairn onto the broncho!"

"Not so bad but it might easily have been worse, old fellow," was the quick response. "I was just on my way to find you, Snags."

"Which I've saved ye the trouble o' huntin' furdur, then."

"Right you are! Which one of the fellows can you trust most thoroughly?"

"Meanin' jest which way, boss?"

"To keep an eye on our game, in yonder. I want to have a bit of a talk with you, in private, and there's far too big a heap of good money hanging in the balance for us to run any risks of having another accident like that of— Nothing has been seen or heard of that rascally Gladwin?"

"Not a hooter, boss—wuss luck!" hissed Old Snags, sulkily.

"I reckon he's took leg-bail for safer quarters, but he can't work us any harm as long as each man keeps an eye open. And if he is that infernal Gopher Gabe— Who was the other fellow you said was in the same box with you, Snags?"

"Dick Roper."

"Find him, then, and put him on guard over Baird and the girl. Just drop a hint into his ear that if he isn't on the keen alert he may turn up as Number Four! I reckon that'll put him on edge."

"It'll make him dodge his own shadow, I reckon," with his hissing laugh, as he took a step or two, pausing to add: "An' you, boss? Whar'll I meet ye up ag'in, a'ter ketchin' Dick?"

"At the dry well. I took mighty good care to get here unseen, but there's no use in running extra risks. If any one *did* play spy, we'll fool him by coming from another direction."

"Heap sight wuss then fool him, boss!" viciously hissed the other.

"Well, we'll see. Put Dick on guard, then follow."

Old Snags found his man and set him on duty so promptly that he overtook his chief just before that worthy gained the secret door giving admittance to the dry well.

"It's all right, boss," he reported. "Ef anybody ketches Dick off his guard, they've got to be mighty sight smarter then the common run o' sech truck."

"He'll fill the bill, until you can relieve him, no doubt," said the chief, finding and working the spring without difficulty, though all was in utter darkness.

"Let me go fu'st, boss. My eyes is pritty nigh as old as I be, but a owl hain't got no edge onto 'em, even yet!" declared Old Snags, entering first and nimbly scaling the rocks, pausing with his head at the opening, to listen intently.

Not a sound came to arouse his alarm, and cautiously climbing out the well, keeping thoroughly covered by the bushes, he quickly but thoroughly scanned the space around, making sure there were no skulkers anywhere within his range of vision.

"Cl'ar as a whistle, boss!" he said, leaning over the mouth of the pit. "Ef any critter follered ye hyar, he's up nigher the ol' stable, I reckon!"

"I don't believe I was dogged, but I'm taking no chances at this stage of the game you understand," curtly responded the chief, as he drew clear of the well.

"That's business, boss!" approvingly hissed the old fellow. "Now, shell I go fu'st, to take a scout over yan' way?"

"No. I want to have a talk with you, and no one can possibly get within ear-shot of us here, without first betraying himself."

"You're mighty right, boss!"

"Of course. Now—you haven't forgotten what I promised you, old boy, when we brought this game off?"

"Waal, I reckon you *did* say somethin' 'bout ten thousan', boss," hesitated Old Snags, licking his protruding lips after pronouncing those round figures. "But I hain't a full-grown hog, an' ef you was in too big a hurry, why—"

"I meant just what I said, Snags. If you do your part well, and help me to bring this job off all right, I'll give you ten thousand dollars for your share of the pudding."

"Ge-lory! You must be hittin' of the old gent most powerful hard! Do you really reckon he'll pay down?"

"It's pay down or go up, Snags!" with a vicious laugh. "I've got him foul every way, and though he may kick a bit, he'll have to take his medicine in the end."

"An'—when'll ye see the dinglats, boss?"

"Before long, though the old fellow asked for twenty-four hours in which to make up his mind. I granted it, for I saw a glint in his eyes that warned me not to try crowding him too hard. But—I say, old fellow?"

"All right, boss!"

"There's the Square Ring gang, you understand! They've been covering the range pretty steadily all day, and they'll try it again to-morrow, unless we can give them a check. Now—will you do it?"

"Kin I do it boss?" slowly asked his henchman.

"If you've got the grit—yes!"

"Waal, ef that's all, mebbe I mought. 'Tain't fer me to make my brags, boss, but I never yit see a job I skeered to tackle, jest through lack o' sand. An' ef you kin show me even one fair chaine to pull it off, I'll make the rifle—or lose a wheel!"

"Of course, there's a certain amount of risk to be run, but with the words I'll put into your mouth, old fellow, they'll not dare harm you. Then, too, though you may not know it at the time, I'll be near enough to chip in if they should try any tricks. You'll take my word for that, old fellow?"

"Ef you say so, boss, I know it is so," was the cool response.

"And you don't ask—you don't even try to guess how I can be one of the party, yet feel so sure of my position that I can promise to protect you, as well?" slowly asked the Black-Cap, his dark eyes keenly fixed upon that repulsive face.

Old Snags gave his yellow tushes a little clash, then said, in the same matter-of-fact tones:

"I know that you've treated me clean white, so far, boss. I know that I've hed full pay fer all you've axed me to do extry, outside o' my sheer o' the reg'lar business. An' knowin' that, I don't ax to know anythin' furdur."

"If all the lads were like you, Snags, I could sweep the whole country clean!" cried the chief, reaching out and warmly gripping a hand. "I'll even up with you, old fellow, if we both live long enough!"

"All right, boss. Even-up goes. An' now, what's the peppergram?"

"I'll give you a note, signed by our two friends down below, to back you up in what you demand. With that as proof of your words, you'll have no hard work to carry a bluff against the Square Ring gang."

Then the chief went on to post his henchman thoroughly in the part he was to play on the morrow, but there is no particular need of giving his instructions in detail. Enough that Old Snags professed himself fully content with them, and more than willing to accept the hazardous mission.

"Ef they git the better o' me, boss, 'twill be arter I've clean wore the clapper o' me out!" he declared, with a sibilant chuckle.

Having reached a conclusion and come to a perfect understanding, the two men retraced their steps, finding father and daughter under guard, just as they had been left.

At a sign from the chief, the black-hooded guard moved away, and the outlaw leader addressed Gregory Baird in cold, hard tones:

"You asked for one day's grace, Mr. Baird, and I partly agreed to grant it. Whether or no I retract that grace, depends on how you meet the proposition I've come back to make you."

"What sort of a proposition?"

"Your friends are making a hot search for you—or for your remains! They are clear off the scent, but there is such a thing as blind luck, and some of the outfit might stumble

across the truth a bit too soon for my plans—and your life!”

“Make your proposition, sir!” growled Baird, sulkily.

“It is this: I will prepare a statement of facts, to which I must have the signature of both yourself and daughter. You will ask your friends to give over their search, and wait for another communication from you before moving further. Will you sign it?”

“Show me the note first,” was the guarded response.

CHAPTER XXXV. A GLEAM OF HOPE.

If the chief could only have known, or even suspected what had taken place since he left his captives for the purpose of sounding Old Snags, it is hardly probable that he would have been in such haste to relieve the black-hood from duty. True, Dick Roper might have got his discharge, but it would have taken a very different shape.

To glance back a few minutes, Old Snags had hardly turned his back to follow after his master, than the tall fellow, muffled in cowl and shapeless coat, crept noiselessly back to the mouth of the chamber, making sure that the man of bristles had indeed left.

His actions were those of a man who suspects a trap of some sort, and he seemed far more uneasy concerning Snags than the spooks that worthy had hinted so freely at.

Gregory Baird noticed this curious behavior on the part of their new guard, and all at once it occurred to him that this being was of about the same size, build and general appearance of the man who had dropped that cheery whisper into their ears, and the brief note into Flora's lap.

The mere idea caused his breath to come quick and strong, and his face altered so greatly that Flora's loving eyes took notice.

“Father—dear father!” she murmured, an arm stealing about his neck, her pale cheek pressed to his. “I believe it—I feel that he spoke truth when he said—brother is alive!”

“I'm trying to hope it but—Back, you scoundrel!” his tones swiftly changing as the Black-Cap moved toward them, crouchingly.

“Hist! for your lives!” came earnestly from back of that ugly disguise. “I'm a friend, here to help you if—I gave you that note!”

At the first word uttered by this man—surely in tones very different from those belonging to the rough, uncouth Dick Roper who has figured in another scene—Flora caught her breath sharply, a wild, frightened light leaping into her eyes as she gazed with almost painful intensity into those dark orbs; all that could be seen of his features, just then.

Then she noticed a swift, peculiar motion of his hand, and her breath went out with a half-sob, half-cry of joy. For—she knew that this black-hooded guard was a friend, not an enemy!

“Kent, my—Oh, father, dear!” sinking her head upon Gregory Baird's bosom, sobbing with powerful emotions.

“Flora—child! What does all this mean, I'd like to know?” the astonished speculator exploded, with dangerous vehemence.

“For her sake, if not your own, Mr. Baird, pray be cautious,” hurriedly whispered the black-hood in his clear tones, coming a bit nearer, though casting an apprehensive glance over a shoulder. “If any of those rascals learn what I'm about to tell you, all is lost!”

“Who and what are you, then?”

“Your friend—your daughter's friend, sir.”

“In that rig?” suspiciously eying him.

“More like it's another cunning trap set by that infernal villain who just left us!”

“Father—don't!” murmured Flora, lifting her head from his bosom and again looking into those brilliant eyes. “He is—if he is what I think—oh Kent!”

That black cowl was raised, revealing the handsome face of Kent Gladwin; a vast improvement over the gaunt, rugged visage of Dick Roper whose part he had assumed, to be sure!

“Flora! you know him? When—what—?”

“I'll explain everything, dear sir, if you'll only give me time,” quickly interposed Gladwin, fearing lest they be interrupted by some of the outlaws before he could fairly accomplish the ends he had in view. “But, for the sake of your daughter, pray lower your tones! If we should be heard, and my disguise even suspected, all would be lost!”

With those words, Gladwin replaced his cowl, though his glowing eyes betrayed his ardent longing to make another and better use of his lips before covering them with that odious disguise. He crept to the entrance, and made sure that none of the gang had been attracted to the spot by those incautiously raised voices.

When he turned again, it was to find Flora close by, her hands extended, her eyes glowing, an almost happy smile lighting up her fair face.

“Tell him—make him understand—all, dear Kent!” she murmured, letting him clasp her hands, but slightly averting her face as his head came lower and nearer. “No—wait—my love!”

Only the ears of a true lover could have caught that precious title, and only a man of far more

than ordinary nerve could have resisted the temptation to both claim and give a reward for it. But Kent Gladwin was both, and after a warm hand-clasp, he added:

“Watch, and warn me if any one draws nigh, my angel!”

Thus his debt was balanced, until a more favorable opportunity, and knowing that further delay might well cause Gregory Baird to burst out anew, the daring sport left Flora to act as sentinel, while he hastened to explain matters to her father.

“This is hardly the manner in which I hoped to form your acquaintance, Mr. Baird,” the young man began, speaking hurriedly, yet with a flattering degree of respect in both manner and tones. “I came to this section on purpose to meet you, and—”

“With what end in view, sir?”

“First, to win your good will, then—I wish I had more time, Mr. Baird, so as to explain matters more at length, but as it is—I met your daughter, and falling over head and ears in love with her, I came out here expressly to ask your permission to woo and win her for a wife!”

“Well, you are—” began Baird, only to be cut short by a soft, coaxing whisper from Flora, backed by a very pleading face:

“Father—please be good!”

“We'll let that point rest for the present, sir. I only brought it up in order to explain how Miss Baird came to recognize me, just now.”

“What are you doing here, and in that rig? Are you one of this villainous gang?” demanded Baird, with a frown of lingering doubt.

“No, sir. I happened on the Square Ring outfit as they were hunting for you, and for a time I joined in with them. Then, taking a notion I could learn more by playing—by working on my own hook, I left the party without saying good-night.”

Condensing his story as much as possible without destroying its clearness, Gladwin narrated how he had been captured and then set at liberty by the strange being who called himself Gopher Gabe.

It was by his advice that he, Gladwin, assumed the place of Dick Roper, whom he chanced to resemble in size and build; and to make this substitution possible, they took the real Roper prisoner, Gopher Gabe promising to be responsible for his safe keeping.

“He did hope to set you free, much as he did me, but unfortunately that escape put the rascals on the alert, and the fellow they call Old Snags has hardly lost sight of you for a minute, since. So, as the next best thing, Gopher Gabe set me to watch for a chance, while he has gone after help sufficient to carry our point by main force, if nothing milder will serve.”

“It was to kill time until he could return, that I begged you to play for time in case that head-devil crowded you. Did he agree?”

“I asked for twenty-four hours longer, before deciding. Will that give your friend time to get here?”

“I hope so—I believe so! If not—”

“Hist!” interrupted Flora, coming toward them. “I hear steps, and they are coming this way!”

“Play for time—and trust to us!” hurriedly whispered Gladwin, to Baird.

Then, turning to Flora, he lifted his cowl barely long enough to press a warm kiss upon her lips, after which he signed her to take her old position by her father's side, at the same time squatting down just inside the entrance, once more the silent, watchful sentinel.

None too soon, either!

Then he was carelessly dismissed from duty by the chief, who had returned in company with Old Snags, to complete his arrangement for the morrow.

The false Dick Roper, seemingly in a particularly sullen mood, kept aloof from the rest of “the gang,” paying little attention to the quips and quirks which several of their number discharged in his direction.

The death of Silent Jackson, in such a mysterious manner, stood the counterfeit Roper in good stead, since all had noticed how powerfully that death had affected Roper, the real. He seemed totally unmanned, and by assuming the gloomy reserve of a man who had only too much food for thought already, Gladwin greatly lessened the risk of discovery.

He hung around, not far from the chamber where the Bairds were confined, until the chief took his departure. Then he mumbly asked if he should resume his position as guard, but Old Snags hissed:

“Not this night, Dicky! You're a heap good man, but thar's too big a pile o' dingbats in thar fer any critter to take my place!”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DEMANDING A TRUCE.

IN spite of the hard day's work they had put in, rendered all the more trying by a lack of success, the owner of the Square Ring Ranch and his men were astir with the first signs of dawn, on the morning following the cloud-burst, and the rescue of Victor Baird.

The first thing Jordan Harpe did after turn-

ing out of his bunk, was to pay his injured guest a visit, bidding the cook, who had “set up” with their patient, make haste with breakfast, so that they could take to the saddle, and he take to his bed.

“Double pay for double work, Danny, ye know!” added the boss, with a short laugh, as of apology; for, in a bachelor establishment, the kitchen artist is a particularly important personage, and by no means to be offended.

Victor Baird was sleeping, worn out by what he had undergone, but that in itself was a favorable sign, so long as his looks betokened neither fever nor over-exhaustion.

As Jordan Harpe stood with folded arms, gazing intently into that face, marred by the many bruises received during that brief but awful fight with the flood, his heavy brows contracted, his lips curled back from his strong, white teeth, giving his face a far from pleasant expression. He looked like a man who finds a serious crisis unexpectedly confronting him, the ending of which cannot be clearly predicted.

Knowing that quiet and sleep would benefit Victor far more than any substitute he might offer, the ranchman noiselessly left the room, going out of doors, where he was shortly afterwards joined by his foreman, Martin Thompson.

“How's the younger, boss?”

“Sleeping. I'd give a pretty penny if that sleep could only last until we've brought his father back, Thompson!”

“Does look to'able tough, don't it? An' he hed a gal—didn't he say somethin' 'bout a sister?”

“Yes,” his eyes drooping, a hand plucking quickly at his beard. “We've got to hunt for her, even if we don't—what do you think about that last note, anyway, Mart?”

“Waal, 'tain't jest fer me to decide, boss, but ef I was you, I do reckon I'd— Look yender!” breaking off abruptly and flinging a hand toward the east. “That hain't him, shorely!”

Jordan Harpe gave a quick breath as he turned to follow that hand with his eyes. A single footman was approaching the ranch, coming from the direction of the ford, but it did not require a second glance for the ranchman to shatter that vague hope.

“It's not Baird, whoever else it may be. One of the boys, probably, though what he's doing afoot, is more than I can guess.”

“'Tain't none o' my lads,” positively declared Thompson.

“Some tramp, then, looking for a job. Maybe a cowboy who's blowed in his outfit over the table. Don't take him on, without he can read his title clear, Thompson, for I've grown mighty suspicious—”

“Hellow, critters! don't git skeered an' run away, jest bec'ase I'm a-comin'!” cried out the fellow, in a shrill, whistling tone that was an enigma in itself.

“An' who in blazes mought you be, critter?” sharply asked the foreman. “As fer runnin'—I'd rather run from then up ag'inst ye, anyhow, ef them bristles o' yours is as hedge-hoggy as they looks!”

“Go shake yerself, critter! I ain't doin' my talkin' to ary critter under the boss. Mornin', Harpe; how goes it, old socks?”

“Who are you?” frowned the ranchman, harshly.

“Waal, jest fer the time bein', I'm a sort o' messenger from—ef you'll jest tell me the name that's writ on to the lower aidge o' this yer' dockymint,” bringing forth a crumpled and none too clean envelope from his pocket, “then I'll tell ye jest who from. See?”

Old Snags grinned facetiously as he held forth the missive, but Jordan Harpe made no move toward taking it; instead, gazing keenly, suspiciously into the old rascal's face.

“Take yer time, Miss Lucy!” in a hissing chant, that ended with a sharp clashing of his yellow tushes. “Never see a raal gritty gent afore, did ye? Never hed the honor o' meetin' up 'ith a gent o' my caliber, nuther, reckon, from the way ye gawp!”

“Who are you, and what brings you here?”

“I'm me, an' I come onto the two lower 'stremities o' my own,” Old Snags hissed, pleasantly; but then swiftly altering his demeanor, he once more extended that envelope, saying: “Fer you, from my boss. Better open an' read it, ef you raally keer 'bout P'arin' whar Greg'ry Baird is, an' how he's comin' on!”

“From Gregory Baird!” cried Harpe, snatching at the envelope and staring at the boldly-written address thereon.

“Waal, I reckon it's pretty nigh from him. Anyway, thar's a mighty heap o' good readin' inside thar 'bout him.”

“Keep him covered, Thompson,” harshly muttered Harpe, tearing open the envelope and drawing forth the inclosure.

“Oh, I hain't ready yit fer to run 'way,” sibilated he of the yellow tushes. “The boss said I was to fetch back a answer o' some sort. An' so—”

“Who is your boss?” demanded Thompson, toying with his pistol, which had left its scabbard at that stern command.

“Ax him, when you see him, won't ye, Mister Man?”

A short, agitated cry came from the lips of the ranchman, and Martin turned to glance into his face. That was pale, save for a small spot of red that showed on each cheekbone.

"No bad news, boss?"

"Yes, and no! He's alive, and the girl is with him, but—"

"Not his sister, in thar?"

"It must be, unless this is all a cunning trick to make us lose more time. Read it, you! I'll watch this rascal!"

"Ef ye'd jest shake a full bottle at me, it'd show a powerful sight better fetchin' up, boss," grinned Old Snags, who seemed wholly at his ease, though he must have known that this was playing with edged tools.

Thompson took the unfolded half-sheet, strong curiosity showing in his face, which gradually melted into a sort of indignant amazement as he slowly deciphered those lines of writing:

"JORDAN HARPE, ESQ.:

"DEAR SIR:—I am writing these lines under compulsion, yet I most earnestly beg of you to comply with the request I am about to make. I did not vanish of my own will, when you left me at the spring, but was captured by the tools of a man—unknown to me, and, I have reason to think, also a stranger to you. This person is holding me for ransom, and as a cruel fate has likewise thrown my daughter Flora, into his power, I can only submit to his extortion.

"He assures me you are moving heaven and earth to solve the mystery of my vanishment, but as this hampers his own movements, you must abandon all search from this hour! If you refuse, the punishment will fall on my head, and that of my poor daughter.

"As you are an honest man, dear sir, I implore you not to take another step on my account, until you hear from us again.

"I dare not attempt to give you a hint, or write more clearly, for he is watching, and will read this, before sending it to you by a sure hand.

"He also assures me that my dear son, Victor, is safe, and with you. Assure the poor lad that we are safe, but that our very lives depend on being left alone, until terms can be arranged for our ransom.

"GREGORY BAIRD.
"FLORA BAIRD."

On the other side was written the following words:

"Respect my messenger, and send him back with your answer. If detained, or harmed in the least, or any effort is made to dog him here, my prisoners shall surely pay the penalty!"

To this there was no signature, but it was hardly less impressive for that neglect.

"An' now, boss," hissed Old Snags, "I'm waitin' fer yer answer, which the boss said was to be plain yes, or plain no. Which is it?"

"Reckon we'd best pinch him, boss?" guardedly muttered Thompson.

"Do it ef ye dast!" harshly whistled he of the tushes, recklessly, his keen ears catching those words. "The boss said as how he was gwine to hold the watch onto me, an' ef I wasn't back in even time, he'd git even onto the gal! An' ef you knowed him, as I know him, you'd wait a weenty bit ' afore talkin' o' pinchin'—much less tryin' of it on!"

"I'll kill you, and your master as well, curse ye!" grated Harpe.

"Waal, I'm gwine," hissed Old Snags, turning his back. "Kill ef it suits ye best that way, but I'd vise ye to holler yer answer a'ter me afore I git clean out o' hearin'! Ef I git back 'thout none—waa, you kin make a guess at the rest!"

The two men interchanged swift glances, then, as Old Snags was already a score yards away, Jordan Harpe called out:

"Yes, then—curses on both you and your master!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A GENERAL UNMASKING.

"ALL going well, Snags?"

"Couldn't go slicker ef they'd bin double-greased fer the 'casion, boss!" hissed the man of the tushes.

"Then the prospect is good? You reckon the old man'll be ready to knuckle?"

"Waal, boss, ef he kicks over the soup, I reckon it'll be beca'se you don't come up to him gentle 'nough," was the reply, in the tone of a man who has weighed the matter very carefully. "The idee is jest like this: he's a powerful hot-headed critter, an' when you jump out o' the bresh at him, head up an' tall a-risin'—waa, it jest nat'ally starches the hair on his backbone, an' then he's boun' fer to kick. See, boss?"

"Then you really reckon that soft and easy's the word?"

"I really do, boss. Fer why: thar's the gal. He's thinkin' o' her, an' bow he kin act the best fer her. An' long's you let him keep his brain cool an' stiddy on a level, he'll jest keep on thinkin' o' her good, an' so be heap sight easier fer to deal with."

"You may be right, Snags. Anyway, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, and begin the deal on that line. Then—I can still put the screws on, if necessary."

By this time the two men were at the rock chamber in which the Bairds, father and daughter, were still confined, and Old Snags slouched along at the heels of his chief, without making any comment on that last speech.

Even without a glance at his face—which was covered with a black hood, according to his invariable custom—one could readily guess that the chief was excited and even a little nervous, now that the crisis had been reached. He was playing for heavy stakes, and even with the odds apparently all in his favor, he was beginning to feel the heavy strain on his nerves.

"Time's up, Gregory Baird!" he harshly exclaimed on entering the presence of his prisoners, like one who had no thought of wasting precious moments in idle talk or ceremony. "I've come for your final decision. What is it?"

"If I yield, how can I know that you will keep your part of the bargain?" hesitatingly asked the one addressed.

"All that can be arranged to suit, provided you meet my terms. The first and most important point to be settled is—do you agree to pay the sum of money I named?"

"In return for which both my daughter and myself are to be set at liberty, safe and unharmed, not to be molested further by yourself or your men?"

"Yes, since you're stuck on having an answer," harshly growled the chief of the Black-Caps, too eager to win his main point to longer endanger it by showing too hard a front. "For the last time: will you pay the sum of money named, as full ransom for your daughter and yourself?"

"I'd pay it, of course, rather than have harm come to my daughter," still hesitated the prisoner, like one reluctant to cross the Rubicon. "But—what if I could not raise the entire sum! Wouldn't you make a reduction? Isn't your terms rather extortionate?"

"Would you sell your daughter for that sum, Gregory Baird?" insolently demanded the chief, anger apparently obliterating the shrewd advice given him by the veteran, who was leaning lazily against the chamber wall, watching and listening to the speakers in turn.

"Stiddy, boss!" came in a monitory hiss from between those yellow tushes; but if his master heard, he paid little heed.

"Look ye, Gregory Baird!" he snarled, viciously, coming closer to father and daughter, a gloved hand menacing them with brutal violence. "I've wasted all the time I'm going to, trying to bring you to your milk without treating you according to your breed; but now, even your mulish obstinacy has got to give way, or—I'll break your back!"

"Mercy—spare him!" faltered Flora, her arms winding about the neck of her father, as though she would shield his life with her own.

"Then, do make use of that little tongue of yours, girl, to bring him to time! He's got to meet me at my figures, or I'll rack his frame until it makes him die ten thousand deaths! And then—I'll sweeten his last moments, by letting him see how thoroughly a man of my caliber can appreciate a fair and charming damsel like—"

"Hellow, thar! what's bu'sted loose, critters?"

The interruption came from Old Snags, and was caused by the hasty entrance of a couple of masked men, their actions denoting strong emotion of some sort.

Still as they both wore the black hoods, and both seemed perfectly at home in the cavern, the old fellow could hardly suspect them of being intruders without ample cause.

The chief turned swiftly at that interruption, and an angry snarl broke from his hidden lips as he recognized the masks.

"What do you want here? Back with ye! Back, I say, and wait until I call!"

But instead of shrinking away, as past experience naturally led him to expect when he assumed that savage tone, the men still advanced, one toward Old Snags, the other approaching himself, with:

"Jest a minnit, boss, fer thar's—one for your nob!"

The black-hood sprung forward as he uttered those words, striking as he came; and the chief reeled back before that heavy fist, half stunned and in very poor condition to successfully resist the wrestler's grip which closed upon him the next instant.

A trip and a fall, the heavy shock depriving the outlaw chief of breath for the moment. Then, with a deftness which surely indicated previous practice, a pair of handcuffs were snapped upon the wrists of the recently all-powerful chief!

At the same instant, acting in perfect concert with his mate, the second mask sprung upon Old Snags, giving him no time to draw a weapon or utter a cry of either anger or alarm; and, though this wrestle was a trifle more protracted, it ended in much the same fashion, and irons were upon the old fellow's wrists by the time the captor of his chief could risk a glance in that direction.

What was rather remarkable, perhaps, not a word broke from either of the prisoners who beheld their enemies so promptly overcome. Even Flora gave no cry, showed no signs of alarm, unless—could it be that her anxieties were solely for the one who overcame Old Snags?

"Traitors! devils! dogs!" snarlingly panted the chief, with his first return of breath.

"What does this mean? Who are you?"

"Well, if you really would like to know," began his captor, removing his mask and laying

bare the strong, resolute face of a man not far from middle age, but the face of a stranger to all now gazing upon him, it seemed. "This is my face, and for lack of a better name, my dear fellow, just call me—Gopher Gabe!"

A hoarse, inarticulate sound came from the lips of the masked chief, for now he began to realize that his evil schemes were surely failing him, just when he felt most certain of complete success.

"Follow suit is a fair rule!" laughed the one who had overthrown Old Snags, at the same time removing his cowl. "Hope I see ye, pardner!"

"The—good—Lawd!" gasped the man with the yellow tushes, his jaw drooping in utter dismay as he recognized the smiling countenance of Kent Gladwin.

"I'll keep an eye on your game, pardner," smilingly uttered the one who had given the name of Gopher Gabe. "Go set the gentleman free, and—Steady, if you please!"

Swiftly he planted his foot upon the breast of the chief, pressing him back despite his efforts to arise.

"Down 'em! Kill 'em both, men!" cried his prisoner, his tones hardly articulate, so intense was his rage, his hope, his fears, all combined.

Gopher Gabe cast a glance over his shoulder, betraying very little fear or surprise at the spectacle which caught his eyes, and which had so suddenly roused the chief to fight against fate.

Just at the edge of the circle of light stood a number of human figures, all with heads hidden by black hoods, each one armed and seemingly merely waiting for their chief to speak the word that would hurl them at the throats of these two audacious fellows.

But—not one of them all lifted hand or weapon at that savage howl! Not one showed the least sign of risking life for their chief!

"Any particular one you wish to play executioner, my dear fellow?" drawled the captor, then giving a nod toward the masked figures, he added: "Mebbe he can decide a little more readily if you will kindly come into the light and show your faces, gentlemen?"

Stepping quickly forward, man after man lifted their cowls. And among their number were revealed the faces of Jordan Harpe, Oscar Finley, and Victor Baird!

"My boy!"

"Victor—dear brother!"

Then, after so many trials the family of Bairds were reunited.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LAST OF GOPHER GABE.

"ALL of which is simply delicious, as far as it goes," laughed he who had declared himself the famous detective; "but still there is a flavor as of something lacking. Anybody know what it can be?"

"Possibly you may find it by removing the hood that fellow still wears!" coldly spoke up Jordan Harpe, pointing downward at the once mighty chief.

"Sure enough! Odd I never thought of that! So—steady, my dear—Martin Thompson!"

For, as that black covering came away, all could see who had so long and so successfully mystified not only his enemies, but his nearest allies as well. And the Black-Cap chief lay revealed as plain Martin Thompson, foreman of the Square Ring Ranch!

"Where's the other fellow, though?" suddenly cried Oscar Finley, his own face very pale, his eyes burning with an unusual brilliancy, for, after seeing how more than cordially Flora Baird had welcomed the handsome sport who had assumed the rôle of Dick Roper, his growing were hopes blasted forever.

Turning from that sight—very painful to him, though to others so joyous, so full of pleasure—he noted the absence of Old Snags.

"He's all right," quickly interposed the man in charge of Martin Thompson. "One of my fellows took him out of the way for a bit."

As a matter of course, explanations were in demand from all parties concerned, and were each sentence recorded in full, these pages would have to be doubled in number or capacity.

But as much that was said has already been placed on record, and as much more can be readily guessed at, a brief synopsis of the more important points will fill all blanks.

Oscar Finley, then, had rallied from his exhaustion, though not until nearly dusk after the flood had expended its force. He had thoughts only for the maiden whom he had fought so hard to preserve from death, and forgetting his own severe bruises, he spent the greater portion of that night in blind groping after her body.

Failing to find this, of course, he managed to make his way to the Square Ring Ranch, where he was warmly welcomed by its master.

Just before dusk on that day, a horseman rode up to the ranch, and gained a private interview with its owner. He announced himself as a detective, and asked assistance in capturing the head of the evil gang of horse and cattle stealers which had for so long cursed that part of the country. And then, having gained the cooperation of Jordan Harpe and such of his men as could be trusted—for, greatly to his angry amazement, Harpe now for the first time learned

the truth; that his foreman was the chief, and several of his best men members of that evil gang—the little party marched to the canyon, where the secret door by means of which, in connection with the rocky bed of the stream, the stolen stock could be hidden away in the cavern until a safe opportunity was afforded for getting them to a market, was located.

Entering the cavern by this door, through which Flora Baird had been so strangely hurled, the party were arrayed in the disguises ordinarily worn by the gang, but which now lay in a heap ready to their hands. For, it was hurriedly explained, each and every one of the outlaws had been captured, bound and hidden away by Kent Gladwin and Gopher Gabe!

Long before midnight, the Square Ring Ranch was pretty well filled by happy friends, listening to explanations, and, a select few of them, receiving still another surprise.

"This is the real Gopher Gabe," said he who had assumed that title for the time being, leading into the room a neatly dressed fairly good-looking gentleman of middle age. "I only assumed the title at his request, the better to break the trail which he hopes will never be followed to the home of—Gabriel Hunter!"

The stranger thus introduced smiled faintly as the late captives gazed into his face with a puzzled light in their eyes. Surely they had seen that face before? And yet—

A hand went out, and lying upon it was a double set of false teeth, which furnished the needed clew; for they were the ugly yellow tusches which had marked "Old Snags!"

"Part of the disguise I wore, the more surely to escape detection," the detective quietly explained, then crushed both plates almost savagely beneath his heavy heel. "I will need them no more, for with this night both Old Snags and Gopher Gabe vanishes, to appear no more!"

"I have played a repulsive, even cruel part, and while trying to gain the end I swore over the grave of my murdered wife and our two little children, I may even have committed what the world would brand as crimes. But—judge me only after ye have heard my story!"

It would be far too long for full details, at this point, and even with the blacker portions touched lightly upon, the recital could not but prove revolting.

Enough that Gabriel Hunter had terrible cause for hating the one we have known as Martin Thompson, and that he swore never to know rest or quiet until he had fully avenged his dear ones.

He had no positive clew, at first, but ultimately he became almost convinced that the chief of the Black-Caps was his man, and to make all doubts clear, he assumed the character of Old Snags, and contrived to not only join the band, but to gradually work himself into the confidence of their leader.

As "Gopher Gabe, the Unseen Detective," Hunter saved many a marked prey, and brought numerous offenders to the bar of justice, though at the same time giving to others the honor which he might have reaped.

He it was who warned Gregory Baird to beware of Jordau Harpe, for at that time he could not decide which was the guilty man, Harpe or Thompson, since he had never yet been able to see the face of the chief.

He it was who set Kent Gladwin at liberty, and he it was who killed Silent Jackson, just as the latter was creeping up to stab Gladwin, who was at the spring, waiting for the arrival of his unknown rescuer.

"I killed him to save a better life. And I can prove that Silent Jackson was wanted for murder, which I can prove he committed."

The more surely to carry out his plans, Hunter kept Gladwin in perfect ignorance as to his identity with Old Snags, playing his part so adroitly that the young man never suspected aught, up to less than an hour before that wholesale unmasking took place.

The man who assumed the title of Gopher Gabe, at that time, was a detective whom the real Gopher Gabe had summoned, meaning to leave with him all the credit for breaking up that dangerous gang.

"I mean to hang my man, and that is all the reward I wish for. I will keep the oath I took above the grave of my murdered ones, then I will go my way—I neither know nor do I care much whither!"

Despite his rather "tough" experience in those parts, Gregory Baird by no means abandoned his plans for settling down as a stock-raiser; and feeling that he owed Jordan Harpe reparation for so unjustly accusing him, he promptly accepted the proposals made by that worthy. And before the week came to an end, the "Square Ring Ranch" had a new owner.

Oscar Finley abandoned all hopes of ever winning Flora for his wife, but, after all, they became related by marriage. Victor could not forget Mabel—nor did he try—and in less than six months from the evening of their first meeting, Mabel became Victor's wife.

Kent Gladwin married Flora, and at once took the responsible position once filled by Martin Thompson—so-called.

Hardin Peck recovered from his wounds, and, though he stuck to his old "profession" of gambler and sport-in-general, he really seemed a better man for the lesson read to him.

The secrets of the "Nest" were fully revealed to all, and the wonderful "spook stories" were more or less clearly explained as having been worked up by the Black-Caps, to drive outsiders away from their haunts. But as so many disagreeable memories were attached to the place, a general meeting was called, and it was decided to "abate the nuisance!"

This was most effectually done by burning the Uncanny Ranch, and destroying the cavern by heavy charges of dynamite.

As for Gabriel Hunter, he kept his vow to hang the assassin of his family, then vanished from sight, no one knew whither.

THE END.

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